

El's Word Book by Noth_lit_8

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Canon Divergence, El thinks the world is fascinating, Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper Parent-Child Relationship, Eleven and Mike Wheeler are Cute, F/M, Fluff, MY BABIES, Not Beta Read, POV Third Person Omniscient, Parental Jim "Chief" Hopper, Post-Season/Series 02, Sweet, Will Byers and Eleven Are Best Friends, but also some deep stuff, i have cavities from writing this, probably will contain some angst

Language: English

Characters: Barbara "Barb" Holland, Bob Newby, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Florence "Flo" (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Sara Hopper, Steve Harrington, Those last three are only mentioned tho; they're still dead sorryy, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Max/Lucas Sinclair

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Summary:

El is frustrated that her vocabulary lags behind those of her friends, so Hopper wants to provide her with a way to see her growth:

El's Word Book

(Each chapter dedicated to El learning a new word.)

Complete.

1. Cover

Author's Note:

This fic will be almost always El third-person omniscient, but this first chapter takes place from the perspective of Hopper. I just can't get enough of the bond between those two.

Enjoy!

January 3, 1985

Hopper had always regarded her as an incredible kid, so he was taken aback when he realized she didn't think of herself the same way.

He was still absolutely not allowing El outside of the house, but after being reunited with the Wheeler kid and her friends, he realized that if they weren't allowed to come to the cabin, El would come to them.

So Hopper had been tolerant of the group of teenagers that regularly took up space in his once-quiet abode. Even if he didn't like it, he knew that interacting with other kids was healthy for El's development. And it made her happy. For the vast majority, it made her happy.

But not always.

At first, when her friends started visiting, she would bounce around the house after they left, excitedly telling Hopper all they had done together, even though he had been watching over his newspaper the whole time. After two months, she was still excited to see them. God, was she excited to see them. Especially that damn Wheeler kid who watched her with the goo-goo eyes. But Hopper noticed that El was getting gradually quieter and quieter after her friends left. She acted the same around them, and she always anxiously watched out the window for them before they were supposed to come. Perhaps this is

why it took El's classic bluntness to make Hopper aware that something was wrong.

The pair was eating their tv dinners of meatloaf, peas, and mashed potatoes as they sat parked together on the sofa. Some soap that Hopper vehemently denied being interested in was playing. (Only because El liked it, of course. Not because he did. Because he didn't.)

Characteristic of El, she gave no warning before hitting him with something he would have preferred to have had a pre-thought-out response to.

"I'm not very smart," she whispered. She didn't say it as though it was a bad thing or like she was ashamed. El stated it as a fact. As though she was stating that the sun was hot or Hopper was old.

Hopper choked momentarily on the mouthful of peas he had in his mouth before slowly lowering his fork to rest on top of his meatloaf. El wasn't looking at him; she was still looking at the husband and wife bickering on the television, possibly having already moved on from what she just said.

He shook his head slightly. "Why in the world would you say that?" Hopper asked, perplexed. El looked up at her surrogate dad, something almost like confusion glistening in her eyes. Perhaps she hadn't expected him to disagree with her. The thought alone put a hole in his heart.

"Because I don't know many things. They all know so many things," she stated, referencing her friends.

Hopper's hands instinctively balled into fists at his side. "Who said that you don't know many things? Was it Mike? Because I will."

"No," El shook her head. "I just know."

El put down her mostly uneaten dinner and retreated to her room for the rest of the night. Hopper put his head in his hands when he realized she didn't even ask for dessert.

January 4, 1985

Hopper knew that this child wasn't his. He knew that he only had one daughter, and she was gone. But he could not deny the paternal instincts that kicked in when he saw El in distress, so he took a quick trip to the nearest office supply store.

Plastic shopping bag in hand, Hopper knocked on the door to El's room. "Kid? Kid, come out. I got something for you."

After a moment, El emerged slowly in the threshold, Magic Tree House book in one hand and dictionary in the other. Hopper felt his body shrink in on itself - she was trying so hard. And she was smart. She just didn't know it.

He had no idea what he was doing, so he coughed and just went for it. "Kid, I don't like what you said yesterday about not being smart. You are smart." He knelt down on one knee to be eye level with El. "In some ways, you're the smartest kid I've ever known. I really mean that."

El said nothing but continued to stare at Hopper, eyebrows slightly furrowed, likely either confused about what Hopper was saying or wondering why he was struggling so badly so talk.

Hopper cleared his throat again. "I got you a word book." He reached into his back and pulled out a purple binder full of loose-leave lined paper. There were rainbow tabs that went through the letters of the alphabet with several blank pages between the tabs.

El put down her book and the dictionary and took the binder, perplexed. "What is a word book?" she asked. Hopper realized he should have explained right away - yet another thing she didn't understand and had to ask about.

He closed his eyes and took El's free hand in his. At first, he thought the girl was shaking, but quickly realized with a jolt that it was him. "I thought you might like having a place to put the words you've learned. It'll be sorta different than your dictionary because it will be only words you know, and you can write what the words mean in your own way. I thought you might like it, but if you don't, it's not a

big deal, kid, because I can take it-

"I like it," El cut him off, and put the binder down to wrap her arms around Hopper. Surprised but relieved, Hopper gently put one hand on her back and ruffled her hair with the other.

When El let him go and picked up the book, presumably to return to her room, Hopper stopped her by putting a hand on her shoulder. His knees were starting to hurt from crouching. "Go grab your crayons and a pencil and come back out here. I got you some stickers to help decorate your cover."

Hopper watched the girl's eyes light up. She knew what stickers were, and she adored them. Her walls displayed some stars and hearts, and Hopper certainly didn't have the heart to tell her it would mess up the paint. But her eyes soon gleamed that familiar look that came before she asked a question. "What's a cover?" she inquired, and Hopper's heart melted when he realized how excited she was to learn the answer.

He smiled. "A cover is the front of something, like a book. See your Magic Tree House book there?" he pointed to the forgotten text on the floor. "That front with the pictures and title on it is the cover. You're gonna make one for your Word Book now. If you'd like to." El nodded and beamed.

Hopper grabbed himself a coffee and went to join the girl who had sat herself down at the table with crayons, stickers from the bag, and her new binder splayed out in front of her. He went to grab his newspaper, when El caught his arm. "No," she said. "You do the cover too."

Well, he had never been much for arts and crafts, but the beam on her face was irresistible, so the pair sat together, El's careful hand printing out "El Jane's Word Book".

"This is the title," she explained. Hopper nodded and smiled weakly at the addition of her second name. The kid had taken a liking to using both of them when describing herself.

Once the cover was thoroughly covered in rainbows, stickers, and

doodles, El slid it into the plastic compartment at the front of the binder. "We might as well start now," Hopper decided. "Did you learn any new words today? Maybe when reading Magic Tree House?"

He watched as El sat quietly for a moment, and then flipped to the tab with the letter C on it.

Chewing her lip in concentration, she slowly took care in writing out each letter and practicing her skills at full sentences.

**Cover: It is the front of a book. It has a title and maybe pictures.
Hop and I made my cover today.**

Hopper's heart soared.

2. Giggle

Notes for the Chapter:

This fic is thawing out my soul.

January 15, 1985

El loved her word book for a number of reasons.

Firstly, she felt herself growing. When reading her beginner-level chapter books, she would pause and look up unknown words in the dictionary, as usual. But instead of continuing on with the story, slightly disheartened at her lack of knowledge, she would stop and print the new word neatly in the book, explaining it in her own way. "See? Look how much you're learning," Hopper had told her. "You're getting even smarter every day." It made her heart warm.

Secondly, she owned something that was all hers. Her room had once belonged to someone else. Most of her clothes were from Goodwill, so other children had worn them (not that she cared). The books were borrowed from the library, containing trace markings of being loved by others, as evidenced by the frequently dog-eared pages, the occasional tear in the weak paper, the rare forgotten bookmark between the print (which El always kept). But her word book was all *hers* and no one else's. Not another soul had ever used it, and no one else ever would. It was *El's Word Book*.

Despite the pride she felt over the book, she decided not to tell her friends about it. She knew that friends didn't lie, but it wasn't a lie if she just failed to mention it, right?

Normally, when El knew the boys and Max were coming, she waited for their arrival with her face pressed up against the window pane, occasionally pulling back to doodle in the fog her breath had left.

But this early morning, she sat curled up on the couch next to Hopper, reading one of her Junie B Jones stories, dictionary and word book laid out beside her. She was so absorbed in her studies (Hopper could tell she was based on how she hardly reacted when he

ruffled her hair. He wished he had been like that as a kid), that she was momentarily alarmed by the patterned knock on the front door.

El bolted to attention, smile widening across her glowing face, eyes sparkling. She glanced up at Hopper, who chuckled and nodded. “Go let them in.”

He didn’t need to tell her twice. El shot right to the door, opening it widely and immediately burying herself in Mike as soon as she saw his dark locks. (Mike justified it as her reacting to the sudden gust of cold January air, but the others knew better, including El.)

He pulled her in and beamed because truthfully, since they’ve been reunited, he’s had a deep-set desire to hold her every minute of every day. He gave a little squeeze. “Hey, El.”

“Hi, Mike,” she murmured, loosening her grip on him to look back at his cold-rosened, freckled cheeks. They stared at each other like that for a moment until Dustin coughed dramatically.

“Um, excuse me? What are we, chopped liver?”

El laughed and released Mike to give Dustin a hug. She didn’t understand the expression, but it just felt good to hear Dustin talk.

Lucas wasn’t one for hugs, which El knew and respected, so he gave her a high-five instead, their special way of greeting each other without needing to smash their forms together.

Max was standing rather close to Lucas, the toe of her shoe drawing patterns in the doormat below her. The two girls still were not particularly warm to each other, and El knew that was mostly her fault. But Mike had consoled her and explained that Max was good, and she even helped in saving Will. She had also noticed that she made Lucas particularly happy and even seemed to take his usually-sour edge off. So El waved at the girl, and Max smiled and waved back, apparently satisfied with their wordless exchange.

Will and El didn’t greet each other, but only because they didn’t need to. Despite only getting to know each other recently, they were tied in a unique way that no one else would ever understand. But that’s a

story for another time.

The party found themselves sprawled across the couches and floor, Gremlins playing on the television but the audio drowned out by the teen's chatter. Hopper made himself comfortable at the nearby kitchen table, shaking his head slightly at how El sat so closely next to Mike, like she was trying to make them become one entity. Mike glanced back anxiously at the chief, who sighed but deliberately looked away. Mike took this as a hint that he could intertwine their hands but *absolutely nothing more*. After waiting a moment and realizing Hopper hadn't shot him, he let the tension in his shoulders melt slightly.

Dustin "sat" upside-down next to Mike, his head falling off the edge of his seat, legs extending up and over the back of the sofa. "Face it, Max," he sighed, hands motioning dramatically. "Ms. Pac-man just isn't as good as Pac Man. The second version of a game is never as good as the first."

Will coughed from his position, lying on the floor with his head in his hands by the television, smiling, content to watch the argument that either side was clearly never going to win.

At the other side of the television, Max shook her head, shockingly blue eyes increasingly widening on her freckled face, about to provide a retort, when she noticed Dustin and Lucas, who was sitting cross-legged beside her, had locked gazes in a knowing way that only long-time friends could have. Her eyebrows rose.

"Um, excuse me, you two?" She turned to Lucas and half-way laughed, half-way scoffed. "You don't get to take a side unless you have an argument, so let's hear it."

Lucas froze and drew in his upper lip, eyes flickering between Max and Dustin. "Um-" he started and stopped, probably hoping someone would interrupt and save him from this debate that he definitely did not want to be a part of.

Someone in the high heavens must have heard his prayer because Will's gentle chuckle floated throughout the room, mixing in with the Goonies' laughter in the background. Lucas broke out into an easy

smile, laughing as well, until Max and the other boys followed. El could feel Mike cheerfully shaking, and although she didn't really understand what was so funny, she found herself smiling and joining in. She was just so happy to be part of this. *This*. This easy happiness and entertainment with people she cared for.

Dustin began to laugh harder, and El looked over to him to try to figure out why. "Oh my god, El, you've got the cutest giggle! Do you guys hear that?"

El kept smiling but dimmed slightly when she couldn't understand why all eyes were suddenly on her. She found Mike smiling softly at her, dark eyes crinkling with the joy on his face. He nodded and shrugged as though it was obvious she had the cutest...giggle? Was that the word?

El swallowed, shifting in her slight unease. She stared back at Mike. "What is a giggle?" she whispered only to Mike, but loud enough for the others to hear.

The arm around El squeezed slightly and El turned to Will when he replied. "It's like a way someone laughs. Everyone laughs a little differently, and you can use different words to explain how they laugh." El nodded, relieved she was following along so far. "'Giggle' is kind of a cute word, and Dustin used it to talk about your laugh because your laugh is cute."

El understood and believed Will's explanation, but instinctively looked back at Mike for confirmation. She noticed the stars littering his cheeks were now highlighted on a pink backdrop. He nodded slowly and coughed. "He's right," Mike whispered back to her, and El was certain that with the sincerity in his eyes, he must be right. She must have a giggle-laugh. A cute giggle.

Immediately after she hugged her friends goodbye that afternoon and waved to Joyce from the threshold of the door, El scampered to her room and emerged in the living room with her binder, her dictionary, and a pencil.

Hopper was setting two places at the table for their late lunch when he noticed El flipping through the lettered tabs on the right side of

her Word Book, and he grinned. “Did you learn a new word today, kid?”

El didn’t respond, thoroughly invested in neatly getting down her new word. Giggle made a “guh” sound, so it probably started with a g. She flipped to the “g” tab and found a place for the word under her definition of “graceful,” which she had learned a few days ago in the book she was reading. El turned to Hopper. “How do you spell ‘giggle’?”

Hopper set down two forks. “G...” he paused, a new idea emerging to him. “Actually, let’s sound it out,” he decided, making his way over to El and sitting next to her on the couch. “What makes an ‘ih’ sound?”

El thought for a moment before confidently meeting Hopper’s eyes and proudly proclaiming, “I!”

The two sounded out the rest of the word, Hopper explaining to El that there are two “g’s” next to each other for some reason. (El thought that was silly. Hopper agreed.) They soon found the new word clearly printed out on the page.

El thanked Hopper and shooed him away when he was no longer necessary, ready to enjoy the form of independence her Word Book gave her by writing down the meaning.

Giggle: This is a way a person laughs. It is cute. My friends say I giggle. My friends say I am cute, and my giggle is cute.

Notes for the Chapter:

If you celebrate, Happy Thanksgiving! I am thankful for my family, my partner, my education, and this website. El is thankful for good friends and Eggos.

3. Stargazing + Constellation

Summary for the Chapter:

Chapter words suggested by Loonation and tinyteddies. What fun this was to write! (Also if anyone knows how to tag users please lmk lol)

Notes for the Chapter:

Holy guacamole I think I have a cavity after writing this.

February 8, 1985

Stargazing: Staring at stars

El heard the excitedly frantic banging on her bedroom door as she wrote out the last letters of her definition. "C'mon, El! The sooner we get outside, the sooner we can set up the bonfire and eat s'mores!" Dustin called from the other side of the wood.

"We just had dinner, Dustin! You'll last another fifteen minutes, I promise," El heard Max snidely but fondly remark. She closed her Word Book and sighed. Bonfire? S'mores? They hadn't even gotten outside yet, and there were already so many new words.

Would she remember what all these new words mean by the time she got back to her binder? How many new words would there be?

All of these problems could be resolved if she just brought the binder with her, but El wasn't sure if she was ready yet to show it to her friends.

But why was she so hesitant? She loved her word book and her friends were always so happy when she was delighted by something new to her, so wouldn't they be happy too? What was she even worried about? That they would think she's stupid?

El's thoughts fell back to a conversation she had with Will last night.

The two had developed a ritual for once every few nights. El would blindfold herself and visit Will before bed, and he would just talk while she listened. El never had to let him know she was coming; she just went and Will somehow knew to expect her. The pair had developed a friendship with undeniable depth incredibly quickly, their pasts seeming to bring their souls close together.

Last night, El had sat on the edge of Will's bed as he talked feverishly about his day. El was content to listen to him ramble, satisfied simply by the fact that this boy who she and her friends had gone to incredible lengths to save was alive and better than he had been in over a year.

"So," Will continued. "Mrs. Prokop asked to use my painting as the example for the rest of the class to follow. She explained the technique I had used, and how others can imitate it. At first, I was a little embarrassed, but it felt so special that I just let it happen." El rested her head in her hands. Will's eyes were shining. "And that's not even where it ended! She asked me to stay a moment after class...which made me late for history, but that was fine. She told me I should design the cover of this year's yearbook! Me! Of all the people in our school, she thought that I should do it!"

Wordlessly, Will had felt El's confusion, so he just casually explained, "A yearbook is something most schools make at the end of every school year. It has every single student's picture, and a lot of pictures of clubs and big events. The AV club had an entire half a page last year!"

When El's curiosity had been fulfilled and she settled back into the content rhythm of listening, Will smiled and said, "No wonder everyone likes you so much. You're so smart. You're learning all these new things about the world, and you just pick up on it so fast."

Another knock stirred El from her thoughts. "Kid, what are you doing in there? I'm going to eat all the s'mores myself if you don't come out soon!"

El still didn't know what a s'more was, but she knew that she definitely wanted one. She had to decide quickly: leave the binder or bring it with her.

Another knock. "I'm coming!" El called, grabbing her Word Book and

a pencil as she flew out her bedroom to meet her friends, Joyce, and Hopper in the main room.

Hopper handed her her coat as Joyce fussed over her gloves, hat, scarf, and second pair of socks. Just as the bundled-up crew was about to leave, El felt herself enveloped by a blanket, and timid hands arranging it around her. She looked back to see Mike, despite his inhibited range of motion due to how many layers Karen had insisted on him wearing, pulling the blanket around her frame. They beamed together, as El grabbed onto the edges with the hand not holding her binder, to keep it tight around her, hurrying out the house at Hopper's only-mostly-joking call of, "What are you two up to?"

~x~

Mike's suggestion of introducing El to stargazing had only been allowed by Hopper and Joyce because of this night's oddly warm air. Winters in Indiana were not typically pleasant, but Lucas had explained that something called a "warm-front" was moving in, and they needed to take advantage of it before it got freezing again. Hopper and Joyce had agreed to this only if they had a fire to keep everyone warm. Mike had resisted at first, arguing it would make the task of stargazing more difficult, but Dustin had argued that this was even better, as they could introduce El to s'mores at the same time. The compromise was achieved.

Max and Lucas (with some help from Hopper) began to set up a fire when they reached the clearing in the woods. The group gathered around the pile of sticks, dropping their supplies of marshmallows, graham crackers, chocolates and poker sticks as they sat.

Mike grabbed onto El's hand when Hopper began to flick a lighter over the collection of wood. He gently turned her face towards his. "This is going to be bright and hot, okay? But Hopper, Lucas, and Max know what they're doing, so don't worry about it. Sound good?" El nodded. Everything that was happening and was set to happen this night sounded great to her.

The flame from the lighter caught, and the group watched the bonfire come to life, bright red and yellow lights climbing from branch to

branch. El slowly took out her Word Book and pencil from underneath her blanket when the chatter around her grew to a level she was comfortable with, sure that the attention was mostly away from her.

Except for Mike.

He had been joking about something with Dustin to the left of him, but his attention immediately went back to El when he felt her shift closer to the fire to utilize the light it cast. “Hey, what’s that?” he inquired, motioning towards the binder with the hand not holding onto her.

El let a timid smile overtake her. “Hop gave it to me. To write and explain the words I learn.” Mike’s hand wandered over the cover, and in the darkness he could make out ‘El’s Word Book’ printed in El’s ever-increasingly-neater handwriting.

“Can I open it?” Mike whispered, picking up from El’s hushed tone that this wasn’t supposed to be something loudly discussed. She nodded and found herself holding her breath as Mike flipped through the pages, fingers flicking over the tabs for each letter. Finally, El watched his face grow from fascinated to breaking out in a beam. “This is awesome, El!” he whisper-shouted, and El couldn’t remember why she had ever wanted to keep the binder a secret.

Mike motioned slightly upwards with a nod, and El followed his gaze, marveling at the sparkles in the sky. The sporadic way they decorated the expanse reminded her of Mike’s freckles.

She felt Mike inch closer to her, his breath warm on her cheek. “Can I teach you some new words?” he whispered, eyes lit up, and El breathlessly smiled.

“Okay,” he started, looking around until he pointed to the right of them both. “Look over there,” he mumbled, pointing towards an area of the sky. El’s gaze followed, not entirely sure what she was supposed to be looking at.

“Sometimes, stars that are closed together make a picture. If you look at these stars and pretend there are lines connecting them, they might

look like something. A lot of them even have stories behind them, and a lot of the time, they're really cool stories," Mike continued. "It's called a constellation. Right now, we're looking at a constellation called the Big Dipper, which is like a ladle. Do you see the stars that look like they're lined up in a row?"

It took El a second, but when she found them, she took his hand enthusiastically. "Yes," she confirmed.

"O-o-kay," Mike sputtered out. El wasn't sure why he had trouble making words when they were so close, but it made something in her tummy flutter happily, she she did it frequently. "At the end of that line of stars, there's a group that forms the part of the ladle that holds food. Wait, do you know what a ladle is?" El did. Hopper had used it once for soup. "Okay, so go ahead and look for it. Take your time."

After feeling lost for a few moments, El felt the stars making up the constellation seem to group together, and the picture soon became clear. The Big Dipper. It was a constellation.

She whipped her head back towards Mike and grinned from ear to ear. "I see it."

El couldn't get enough of stargazing. She loved the constellations, and every time she and Mike found one, she recorded its name and the lore that went with it into her book. Dustin handed her a s'more somewhere in the night, and the taste of its sticky sweetness would remind her of this night every time she had marshmallows from then on.

All too soon, it was the middle of the night, and El found herself fighting sleep in order to keep gazing at the sky and at Mike's face. However, she drifted into unconsciousness, curled up to Mike, peacefully dreaming of each freckle on Mike's face shining as brightly as the stars in the sky.

She wasn't awake to see Hopper stop Max from stomping out the fire on her own, and Lucas shaking his head slowly while laughing. She wasn't awake to see Joyce wrap her arms around Will, mother and son always thankful the other was safe. She also wasn't awake to see Hopper, deliberately ignoring how close she and Mike were, pick her

up and carry her back to the cabin, placing her in her bed as Mike left her Word Book and pencil on the side table.

The next morning, she decided to find out if Mike's cheeks had any constellations.

Constellation: A picture stars make in the sky.

4. Jealous

Summary for the Chapter:

Not a suggested word, but I wanted to do it soooo badly. Will be switching from word suggestions and my own picks from here on out. :)

Please check the beginning notes! Thanks!! xox

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright ya'll, I got some questions for ya. I'm so thrilled with all the positive feedback and constructive criticism I've gotten for my first multi-chapter fic, and I want to keep taking this fic in a direction both I and you are happy with! So I would really appreciate some comments answering the following questions:

1. What do you think about making some chapters multi-situational? By this, I mean El learned about a word (ie: wedding) and then having the second half of the chapter skip forward to her wedding or something. There are a number of words I feel like El would learn in rather unremarkable situations, but apply in situations I would realllllly like to write about.

2. Similarly, what do you think about El learning about sex (because someone get this poor child some proper sex ed!) and then a flash-forward for the second-half of the fic to her first time. I will not be writing underage sex (I know it happens, hell I know I was doing it, but I'm n o t a b o u t i t personally as a writer), which is why I feel the flash-forward is necessary, because I don't like the idea of El learning about sex while she's an adult (like c'mon, someone teach this girl how her body works!) In this case, I'd be either changing the rating of the fic to include

this, or creating a separate work with the "missing" component for those of you who don't want to see it. This wouldn't be part of the fic for a while now, but I'm just thinking long term!

Please reply with your thoughts so I can start planning out some stuff. Okay, love you! Thanks bunches. xox

March 25, 1985

El knew that Max was trying to make friends with her. Max had been friendly to El since the day they met - well, the day Max met El, not the day El met Max. Ever since, the two girls had coexisted for the sake of the party, but that didn't mean they necessarily liked each other.

Max's efforts to greet El kindly and make casual conversation gradually diminished every week, until the two hardly made eye contact. El had an inkling this was her fault; the other girl had clearly tried to get to know her, but El wanted no part in it.

This was where she got confused: Why didn't she want Max around?

El had almost every reason to like the red-haired, witty girl. She softened Lucas' rough edges, had a continuous friendly and hilarious banter with Dustin, and, as Mike explained, played a critical role in saving Will from the mind-flayer. Max brought her own humor and intensity to the party, giving it even further life. She was respectful and kind to El, and nice to Mike.

She was so nice to Mike. Boy, El did *not* like that.

Max wasn't as close to Mike as she was with Lucas and Dustin, if the way she spoke to them gave any indication. But every time Max even spoke to Mike or sat too closely to him, El felt a rush of feelings that were brand new to her, and she hated them. She hated how the blood rushed to her cheeks and her brows furrowed every time the two laughed. She hated how her stomach felt like it was dropping in her

body and her fingers wanted to curl in towards her palms. She hated the feelings Max made her feel, so naturally, she wasn't inclined to be warm towards her.

Whenever El noticed the unpleasant sensations bubbling up inside her, she simply waited for them to burn off, and they always did.

Almost always.

The first time since the snowball that Hopper permitted El to leave the house and its surrounding woods, the party knew exactly where they wanted to take El: the arcade.

Hopper walked El through the woods where they knew Jonathan, the designated chaperone, and Will would be waiting in the pickup. Despite Hopper's desire to insist El overdress to shield herself from any lingering bite of the winter, he knew spring was indeed springing, and he let her leave the house in only a light jacket. El silently decided to tie it around her waist as soon as she was out of Hopper's range of vision, as it not only was definitely too warm, but she loved the vibrancy of her red t-shirt underneath.

As they walked, Hopper glanced down at El, who was looking ahead of her but felt his eyes. Abruptly, Hopper stopped, and El only kept on a few more paces before realizing with confusion that he was kneeling. This puzzled her for a few reasons, one of which being that Hop was always complaining of bad knees, and he rarely knelt anymore to be at eye-level with her.

El noticed that Hop's mouth was drawn into a line, and as he searched her eyes, she knew he meant business. She watched him cough.

"El, kid, I need you to understand something, okay? This is very important." El didn't even nod; she was clearly intently listening and Hopper knew it. "I don't like the fact that I'm not going to be watching over you, but I know Jonathan is very capable, and I trust him and you should trust him too. And I know your friends would do anything to protect you. And I know you know not to use your powers where people can see you. And I know you know how to—"

“Hop,” El interrupted, rushing into the man for an embrace. “I will never leave again,” she mumbled into his shoulder.

Hopper shook his head and looked up. The days were getting longer, and the sky was still blue despite the afternoon. He squeezed El tightly. “I believe you.” There was much more he wanted to say, “You’re just growing up and I don’t know how to handle it,” “I know you’re not my daughter but you’re the closest thing I have left to one,” and, “I don’t know what I would do if you were taken,” among the bunch. But he settled on being satisfied with the hug, enjoying the walk to the car, and waving her off as she left with Jonathan and Will until he had to turn around so the girl wouldn’t see his watery eyes.

El and Will didn’t have much to talk about because they had just spoken again last night, so they enjoyed the serene laconism with only the gentle bump-bump-bump of the moving truck to remind them of their exciting destination.

After El tied her jacket around her waist and the trio entered the brightly-lit arcade, the silence was shattered, intense voices and competitive banter competing for dominance with the beeping of games. “El! Will! Over here!” they heard someone from their party shout. Who exactly could not be inferred over all the other, less important noise.

Lucas was engrossed in Centipede while the others huddled around him, close enough to see everything on the screen but not close enough to bump into him and mess up his score. They were all hollering support and suggestions, and Will quickly rushed up to join their chaos as Jonathan smirked and leaned up against a nearby console. Mike looked towards El, needing to give a double-take because of how distracted he was, and the two interlocked hands as habit when he realized she was here.

El was slightly overwhelmed by all the stimuli around her; the blinking lights of each game, the moving pictures on the screens, the cheers coming from every group at the arcade, and the subtle smells of sweat and anxiety crowded the atmosphere. Will seemed to sense her discomfort, as he shot a reassuring smile at her from the other side of Lucas. El let the corner of her mouth twitch upwards, and she

squeezed Mike's hand to have something to ground her.

He turned to El and smiled. "I'm so glad you're here, El," he whispered, barely audible above all the chaos. She melted into his side.

"Me too."

By the time Lucas lost, El was fully encaptured by the dynamics of the game and wanted to see more. "My turn!" Dustin and Mike both called as they both grabbed for the controls. El giggled as the two fought for the next play until Mike won, and Dustin stood back in a mock-angry huff.

Everyone held their breath until Mike started the game, and the party yet again erupted in noise. El pressed her palms together, feeling strangely detached from Mike and searching for reassurance through her own pulse.

Suddenly, El felt the air shift, as the others seemed to tense. She couldn't help but tense as well. All the cheering seemed to halt for a long split-second, until Max screamed, "Left, Mike, left!" Mesmerized, El watched Mike sharply veer the centipede left, and the screen abruptly became even more chaotic.

Moving left must have been the right choice, because Will, Dustin, and Lucas began hollering and clapping, and Max excitedly punched Mike playfully on the shoulder as she beamed.

El felt like she was watching everything unfold before her in slow motion. Mike laughed and grinned when Max touched him, and she jumped up and down in excitement. Her eyes were completely alight, and her cheeks were becoming rosier because of her yelling. Mike was totally focused on the screen in front of him, seeming to feed off of Max's excitement.

El felt that same awful feeling creeping up on her, starting in her stomach, making her fingers and toes curl in, her arms shaking and face beginning to burn.

She wanted to throw Max's hand off of Mike's shoulder and hurl her

backwards until she knew that she was never to touch him again. And El had no idea why.

She remembered Hopper's serious talking-to on their way to Jonathan's car. *"I know you know not to use your powers where people can see you,"* he had said, and El had half a mind to disobey him.

Suddenly, her whole body went cold with the numbing realization of the implications of her desire. She wanted to hurt Max, and she was pretty sure that Max didn't deserve it.

It was all too much. She stumbled backwards as though the knowledge she wanted to do something bad had physically struck her, and when she gained control of her footing, she found herself dodging through crowds of people, navigating through a blur of blinking lights and menacing beeps. She didn't see Will reach out for her before she was gone, and she didn't notice Lucas having seen all the emotions flood her as he followed her only a few paces behind, leaving Jonathan broken over deciding if he should stay with Will (this won over), or follow the two.

El finally stopped in a quieter area that Lucas recognized as the small hall between the arcade area and the closet where they kept the broken games. When she spun around, Lucas' presence so close to her startled her so badly that she instinctively flung Lucas back only a few feet, but enough to make her feel ashamed.

Lucas didn't seem phased by the disruption, shaking his head and approaching El again. The two stared at each other, two powerful forces that have always been on the same team, despite not always recognizing so. Two powerful forces that never backed down, which is why El was surprised when Lucas' words were starkly softer than his hardened expression.

"Why don't you like her?" he asked, and El had no answer. She shook her head, not knowing how to respond, but Lucas just waited for a real answer.

"I don't know," El finally whispered. It was true; she didn't know. She didn't know why Max invoked such a horrible sensation within her.

Lucas' rough edges began to shine through when he crossed his arms and stared, unblinking. "Well, then think harder."

El shook her head again, trying to sputter out words that she wasn't sure she actually had. "I saw her...before Will's house," El managed to get out. Lucas raised an eyebrow, and El took that as a cue to continue. "She was in the gym with Mike, and they were laughing and happy, and..." she felt tears welling up and took a deep breath. Her nose was now beginning to bleed, and thankfully took the tissue Lucas more-or-less thrust at her. "I feel bad feelings. In my stomach, in my hands. I don't know what it is."

Lucas nodded. They didn't always get along, but El was thankful to have a member of her party who was so strong and logical. She knew Lucas was fiercely protective from when they worked to find Will, and she felt him prickling in the same way he had back then.

"Well, I don't know what your problem is, but—" Lucas stopped his lecture, standing back on his heels as El watched in confusion as the gears in his head spun until he finally stared at El in awe.

"You're jealous," he told her. "You're jealous of Max. You think she's gonna take Mike from you, don't you?"

El paused. The second half of the explanation made sense to her. She didn't like Max being near Mike, or even talking to Mike. Was that it? Was she worried Max would start doing things with Mike that she got to do with Mike? The thought alone made her stomach flop.

Lucas must have noticed the ill expression on her face, and he nodded. "Yeah, you're jealous. Well, that's silly because Max is taken. I made sure of that. And Mike is smitten with you. You don't have anything to be nervous about," he finished the last sentence almost with a laugh, clearly more amused now than upset at her.

El felt as though her head was spinning. She didn't know what Lucas meant about Max being "taken", but she was further confused by another term. "What's jealous?" she cautiously inquired.

Lucas didn't laugh at her or shake his head. He just explained, "Jealous is when...I mean, it's a bad feeling. A really gross feeling.

You feel jealous when you...when you think someone you like might like someone else in the way they're supposed to like you. Does that make sense?" And for El, that was when everything clicked.

She didn't know why the jealousy happened, but she knew that she liked Mike in a special way. A very special way. A very special way that nobody else better dare like Mike in. She was jealous of Max.

Lucas sighed. "Let me show you something," he said, and turned to lead El back to the party. She wiped the last of the blood away from her nose, silently pleading no one had seen her push Lucas without touching him, as she followed him back.

Mike was still playing centipede, and no one besides Will and Jonathan seemed to have noticed Lucas' and El's absences. Jonathan nodded as tension seemed to melt from his shoulders, relieved to see the two of them back.

Lucas tapped Max on the arm, who was no longer touching Mike but instead clutching the edge of the console. Before she had even fully turned around, El watched in fascination as Lucas smashed his lips against the red-head. At first, Max appeared shocked, but soon leaned in and let Lucas rest his hand softly on her cheek until he pulled off. Every teen, Max included, stared at Lucas, slack-jawed, knowing the two were together but not having been witness to such PDA before.

El's face was the odd one out. She wasn't appalled or awe-stricken, but instead grinning from ear to ear, finally understanding there was nothing to be jealous about.

Dustin was the one to finally break the silence. "Jeez Lucas, can't you two get a room?"

Will scoffed and wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, did we really need to see that?"

Lucas had a funny-looking grin on his face while Max, noticeably redder than before, turned to grasp the console's controls. "My turn," she mumbled out, smile pulling lightly on the edges of her mouth.

Mike left the spot right in front of the game and joined El. He was

lightly chuckling. “I have no idea what that was ab-”

He was interrupted by an armful of El.

Jealous: an awful feeling in your body when you think someone likes Mike how you like Mike. I should not be jealous.

5. Fashion

Summary for the Chapter:

Thank you IndeAngel and blackflamerose for suggesting this chapter's word! I thoroughly enjoyed writing this. So much so, that I'm posting again after only a day! I just couldn't help myself!

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello my lovely readers. Thank you so much to everyone who took the time to read my notes from last chapter and comment some responses. It really meant the world and was incredibly helpful. I decided not to have any sex in this fic, and it will remain rated T for occasional strong language. I will also not be going through with any time-hops. I really liked this idea at first, but the more I've thought about it, the more I realize I would rather approach these other topics through other works.

After this work is completed (but it won't be for a while, I swear!), I'll be writing a significantly darker fic which tackles the healing after sexual trauma. Just so you know what's to come! Although not for a while; I'm living for this fluffy shit so hard.

Again, I cannot thank you enough for all the love and constructive criticism. How lucky I am to have found this community! Enjoy the chapter!

xox

April 2, 1985

“Hop?” El called from her room.

Hopper had been setting out lunch when he heard El's yell. Was that

a hint of upset he heard?

Instinctively, his heart skipped a beat as his recently-newfound dad instincts began stirring in him again, thoughts shooting off in his mind like rapid gunfire. Did someone upset her? God, if someone upset her, he'd tear them a new one. Or worse, did she have a panic attack over something? Hopper knew she had those every so often—Oh shit, what if it was something from the upside-down?

He couldn't help but rush to El, not even bothering to knock before throwing open the door and scanning the room. "Ellie, what?" he shouted, the pet name slipping out. "What's going on? Are you okay?" the Chief's gruff voice choked out.

Hopper only relaxed a bit when he saw El standing in the middle of her room, no blood falling from her nose, seemingly perfectly well. He glanced around again for danger and found nothing.

"Hop," El repeated, this time clearly letting her upset bleed into her voice. Hopper's brows furrowed in confusion until his eyes were caught on the right leg of her overalls. It was splitting at the knee, and the surrounding fabric clung to El far too tightly to possibly be comfortable.

The girl was getting taller, older, and still gaining weight as her body tried to catch itself up to her age. "*Oh god,*" he thought. "*She's growing.*"

Hopper shook his head for a moment, thankful the situation was, although not ideal, better than the alternatives he had considered. But he froze when he saw El's deep frown and her slumped back, clearly defeated and upset at the destruction of her favorite article of clothing.

He tutted his tongue, scratched his beard, and muttered, "I can't believe it, kid, but you're going to need a new wardrobe."

~x~

Hopper knew he wasn't exactly an expert in style. At work, he wore his uniform. At home, he wore whatever shirt from his drawer was on top (which is why he often rotated through the same five). So the next time Mike was around, he had to sit him down and ask a favor.

The party was enjoying a pizza with a long-forgotten movie playing in the background as they spoke of whatever kids talk about these days. Hopper swelled with pride when he noticed Will helping El jot down words in her Word Book she learned through the conversation. Thank the Lord that she was finally comfortable enough to show that to her friends.

"Wheeler!" he called from the kitchen area. Mike looked up from his place next to El and quickly paled. Hopper couldn't help but suppress a laugh every time he saw how much he intimidated the young man, despite never having given him a verbal warning about getting too close to El. A look was all it ever took.

Mike took a deep breath, and El tried to grab his hand when he began to stand up. Hopper watched with fascination as, as quickly as flicking a switch, she became at ease and dropped his hand, with Mike only needing to reassure her with a smile and a few words Hopper couldn't make out.

In the kitchen, Hopper was pouring out lemonades when Mike approached him. "Yes, sir?" he asked, voice wavering slightly. He again stifled a laugh.

"Hey, kid. I need you to do something for me. Well, for El, moreso." Mike nodded vigorously, despite not even knowing what the favor was yet. It made Hopper feel thankful that if El was going to be smitten with any guy, it's a good thing it was with the Wheeler kid.

"I need you to ask your sister if she can take El shopping. She needs new clothes and," he motioned to his age-old shirt and solid black shorts, "I clearly don't know what I'm doing."

Mike smiled and pulled at the edges of his shirt. "I bet she'll really like that."

Hopper agreed. "I think so, too. Just have your sister give me a call,

alright?”

When Mike asked Nancy for the favor later that evening, he whined to her for what seemed like forever, for permission to come with. But Nancy put her foot down, not exactly sure of how she was going to handle this shopping spree, but sure of one thing: she was not going to haul her little brother along.

~x~

A few days later, El rushed to the door upon hearing the secret knock, ecstatic to see the older girl. She didn't know what to expect of this trip, but she knew that she desperately wanted overalls to replace the no longer usable ones. She had run a comb through her hair and washed her face, hoping to come close to measuring up to Nancy's beauty. Since the first time El saw Nancy in a photograph in the Wheeler's living room, the first thing she always thought when looking at her was “pretty”.

Nancy smiled warmly when El, bouncing slightly on her toes, opened the door. “Hi, El,” she greeted, and El hugged her timidly. Nancy smelled like the chocolate-chip cookies Mrs. Wheeler made that Mike sometimes brought over.

Hopper made his way to the door while El left momentarily to make sure her bed was made before leaving the house. Hopper had recently taught her about chores and responsibility, and El was eager to pull her weight. When she returned, the two were talking in hushed tones, and El watched as Hopper pressed a wad of green papers, money, as El had recently learned, into Nancy's palm.

The two girls left the cabin, El glancing back at Hopper to give him a wave as he called, “Be back before sundown!”

On the car ride to Macy's, Nancy had a lot of questions for El, the teen found. How does she like cabin-living? What books are she reading?

At one point, Nancy asked, “Has your dad learned how to do anything more than microwave dinners, yet?” She realized as soon as her question left her lips that she should have worded that differently. Mike had explained to her that El doesn’t call the Chief her dad, but Hop instead.

El knew what a dad was. The characters her stories usually had dads. Hop did a lot of things for her that dads commonly do; he took care of her, ate dinner with her, and helped her solve her problems. But she wasn’t sure if she felt ready to have a dad of her own, yet.

But El took the question in stride. She shrugged. “He doesn’t cook well. The TV-food tastes better.” Nancy laughed, half-amused, half-relieved.

The pair arrived at the Hawkins mall and went in through the Macy’s entrance. El was struck with how beautiful the store was; there was a glass type of light that dangled from the ceiling, reflecting rainbows when the pieces turned in a certain way. There were rows and rows of clothes of bright colors, pretty purples and pinks and light-blue jeans. The floor was cleaner than the cabin’s usually was, and a red carpet wove through the aisles.

“Welcome to Macy’s!” an overly-excited voice chirped. El looked up as Nancy shot a smile at the tall, skinny, very pretty lady in the black and white printed dress approaching them. “Can I help you find anything, today?” The lady was looking at Nancy, not her.

“No thanks,” Nancy replied, grabbing El’s hand and pulling her away from the woman and the other groups of people at the entrance. El was thankful for this, as the lady hadn’t actually seemed so happy to see them, despite what she said.

Nancy was joyfully chattering away about what’s “in” this season. El knew it was spring, but she hadn’t known there were clothes that were “in” in spring. Did that mean there were clothes that were “out” for spring? “What’s your sense of fashion?” Nancy asked, blue eyes crinkled into an enthusiastic smile.

El creased her brows. “What’s fashion?” she asked in reply to Nancy’s question.

Nancy slowed down her pace, and her eyes softened with the realization El knew nothing about clothes. She spent the first thirteen years of her life in a hospital gown, and the last year-and-a-half in...whatever Hopper got his hands on, it appeared.

Nancy started her explanation with, "So, clothes are supposed to be fun. There are lots of different kinds of clothes that come in different styles, and the styles you like to wear are your sense of fashion." El nodded, mostly following. "Your clothes can even kind of say something about what you're like. I wear a lot of pinks and soft blue sweaters, which says that I'm kind of girly, and I like to be comfy." Fascinated, El thought in silence for a moment.

"What do my clothes say about what I'm like?" she asked. Nancy chuckled.

"Well, everything you've been wearing is stuff that Hopper's picked out for you, so I think you'll need to pick out your own clothes. Then we might be able to tell." El smiled, excited for her adventure in fashion. "That doesn't mean you should judge someone based on their clothes though, okay? There are a lot of different reasons people wear the things they wear. But for people who are really good at fashion, they use their clothes to express themselves. Sound good?"

El smiled as they reached a section with a banner with the label "Teen Girls" hanging down. "Sounds good."

There were so many clothes in the area that El turned to Nancy, slightly lost. "I don't know what to get," she admitted, and Nancy took her hand again.

"That's totally okay. Let's start over here," she suggested, guiding El towards a cluster of shirts and dresses. "Out of the things here, what's your favorite?"

El took her time looking through the racks. What finally caught her eye was a light-pink t-shirt with white polka dots that reminded her of the stars Mike had recently shown her. El picked it up by the hanger. "This one," she decided, showing Nancy.

Nancy nodded. "That's really pretty, El. Go ahead and find some

more things you like. I'll grab this in a few different sizes for you to try."

Once El got into the swing of things, she was finding clothes she liked more and more. An acid-wash denim jacket, a few pairs of shorts that Hopper would later wish were longer, but still bite his tongue because of how they put a bounce in her step. A pastel yellow shirt with ruffles that were fun to play with, and a few shirts in various colors with a pattern Nancy called "tye-dye." But her favorite of everything was the periwinkle sundress with pink criss-cross stripes, plaid as Nancy called it, all throughout.

Nancy explained to El as they walked, both their voices muffled slightly by armfuls of clothes, that she has to try things on before she buys them, to make sure they fit. El locked herself in the changing room with all the articles while Nancy waited patiently on a couch outside. "Come out when you put something on, so I can see it!" she called, thrilled for the girl to be having this new experience.

El came out in a soft green tye-dye shirt and denim skirt first. Nancy clapped as El timidly approached the nearby mirror, adjusting the way the skirt sat on her waist and running a hand through her hair. "Pretty?" she asked Nancy. Nancy confirmed.

"Very pretty." A thought crept into her mind. This was the girl's first time ever shopping, so she

El came out in all the items, every single one of which she loved, until she got to the last one: the dress. Nancy didn't have words for a moment, her heart warming at how this girl had gone from a hospital gown to this beautiful summery dress, and if El's radiant beam said anything, El couldn't be more thrilled too.

The bottom half of the dress flared out slightly as the top clung to her lithe frame with spaghetti straps. "Hop's going to be upset you look so grown up," Nancy noted, "but you look really pretty, El."

El shook her hand, and it took Nancy aback. She was so pretty in the dress. She had almost laughed at how her little brother would stammer over seeing her in it some day to come. What had happened to this girl to make her think she wasn't pretty.

“What do you mean, El?” Nancy prompted, cautiously.

El shook her head again. “No,” she decided. “Bitchin’.”

Nancy thanked the lady at check-out for scanning the dress while it was on El, as the girl didn’t want to take it off. On the car ride home, El pried her eyes away from the budding trees flying past, and asked Nancy, “What does my fashion say?”

Nancy grinned, having spent the ride so far thinking of the perfect answer to this question, in case El asked. “I think they say that you’re a very happy person.”

She was right. El was happy.

When El strode in through the cabin door, Hopper looked up from his newspaper and immediately began to sputter. “El!” he exclaimed, slightly upset at how much more grown-up his...not his, he corrected himself...little girl looked than this morning when she had left the house. El just silently put her bags down on the couch and disappeared to her room for a moment before emerging with her Word Book and pencil. She joined Hopper, who was eating at the table.

Hopper decided to choose his next words very carefully, not wanting to make El feel like her clothing choices were wrong. “You look very nice,” he just decided on.

El nodded faintly, immersed in her word book.

Fashion: How you dress. It can say something about you. My fashion says I am happy.

Pleased with the definition, especially the last part, Hopper stood up to get El a plate, sure she must be hungry. He ruffled her hair, mostly needing the reassurance that she was still his little girl, and was rewarded with a smile. “Do you like your clothes, El?”

El nodded. “Yes.” She shut her book and took the plate from Hopper.
“Pretty. And bitchin’.”

6. Roller-coaster

Summary for the Chapter:

Thank you loti_miko for this word! Wow, was this a joy to write! I've appreciated your detailed comments so much. <3

Thanks for the detailed feedback and the love, everyone! I have so much in the works. xox

April 13, 2017

Dustin had explained to El that it was the perfect time of year to go to an amusement park. When the weather was beginning to warm, they would be comfortable while at the same time avoiding the summer crowds.

El already knew what the word amusement meant, as it was a word she had discovered in Nancy Drew. Dustin had seemed proud of her when she already knew the word, and he explained that an amusement park is basically just what it sounds like: a park you go to that has things that amuse you.

She had immediately copied it into her book, word for word. "Make sure you mention that they're so much fun," he had emphasized. El added the note.

The trip had been Dustin's idea. Everyone seemed enthusiastic about the suggestion, except for Mike, who was rather quiet about the whole thing. El noticed and cocked her head at him, and under her gaze, Mike forced on a smile because how could he deny this perfect girl of such an experience?

What was planned as a small outing ended up requiring two cars. Hopper wanted more than just his eyes to watch the teens in such a large, crowded space, so he recruited Joyce, Jonathan, and Nancy to come along as well.

El had hardly slept the night before the big day. She had spent the night with excited butterflies in her stomach, having caught the contagious enthusiasm of the rest of the party. She had entertained herself at first by reading, but when she heard Hopper, who had assumed the girl was sleeping, watching a soap in the middle of the night, she watched it along with him until passing out on the couch.

When the particularly hot morning approached, El pulled on her new shorts and one of the bright tie-dye tanks. Hopper made her bring her a jacket.

Hopper sat behind the wheel with Joyce in the passenger seat. Mike was squished in the middle between Dustin and El in the back. He and Dustin had bickered over who would get the window seat for the long drive, and Mike eventually lost, comforted by the knowledge that at least he would be next to El. Neither boy had suggested El sit in the middle, as they knew how watching the scenery speed by on drives was still fascinating to her.

The trio played Twenty Questions (Mike and Dustin were very careful to only choose things El has undoubtedly learned already) while Joyce and Hopper conversed quietly in the front, until El fell asleep from the gentle rock of the car, and all conversation silenced.

Mike sat as still as could be the whole ride, hyper-aware of the slumbering state of the girl slouched onto him. When one of her curls tickled his nose and he felt a sneeze coming on, Dustin pinched his nose for him.

Hopper watched the encounter through the rear-view mirror, giving thanks to any deity out there that El ran into those particular kids that rainy night long ago. Those particular kids who adored her and treated her like the worthy, beautiful force of nature she was.

When the car lulled to a stop in the parking lot and the car with Jonathan, Nancy, Max, Lucas, and Will pulled in at the next spot, Mike found he desperately didn't want to wake the sleeping girl. She looked so peaceful, delicate lashes dusting her skin and nostrils slowly flaring with each rhythmic intake of breath. Mike thought he could watch her breathe forever.

Dustin had a different idea. He unbuckled and reached across the car, tapping El on the nose, causing her to wrinkle it in confusion and blink her eyes open. Mike beamed at the gentle way she woke. "We're here," he whispered.

The teens clambered out of the cars and made their way towards the park. Mike and El were peacefully clasping hands until Dustin skipped up from behind them and hooked his arm around El's elbow.

"El, our fair lady! We've got a day packed full of activities for you. We're gonna start off on some of the smaller rides and work our way up to the bigger ones. I'm sure even the big ones will be no match for you, but let's still start small...er. Not small, exactly, but small *er* ." El nodded happily and skipped to keep up with Dustin, who she was still locking arms with. Mike hoped he was subtle when he slipped his hand out of hers, significantly less in a hurry and hoping that if he lagged behind, he might be able to delay arriving to the rides.

To Hopper's relief, Dustin had been right about going to the park in April; there was hardly a crowd, and it appeared almost impossible for someone to snatch El without him seeing. Still, he made sure she was attached to a buddy at all times; usually with Mike, but sometimes arm-in-arm with Dustin or Will.

The first ride they went on was called the Scrambler, whose name reminded El of the eggs Hopper made sometimes in the morning. El asked Will why it was called the Scrambler, and he explained to her that sometimes, rides might give you a sick feeling in your stomach, but you're not actually sick and it goes away soon. This ride can do that to people because it twists and turns so much. El wasn't worried; no amount of a stomachache could prevent her from participating in this experience.

There was no line, so the teens, including Nancy and Jonathan, hurried through the entrance, Mike being pulled by a very excited El. The carts were huge, allowing the eight of them to all squeeze into one today. Max was delighted when El scrambled in next to her, towing Mike along, and Lucas gave her a sly thumbs-up.

El loved the Scrambler. She loved the funny floating feeling it gave her stomach. Nancy caught her when she climbed out and nearly fell

over, giggling at her own dizziness.

Dustin hadn't lied, he had planned out the whole day incredibly intricately, having chosen each ride based on its location in the park. "Eventually, we wind up right where we want to be: Steel Force. That's the tallest ride in the state. Last time, I could have sworn I was as high as the birds fly." El wondered if she got closer to the birds in the sky, would be easier to hear them sing?

When they got to the Ferris wheel, El realized something. "Hop?" she asked, turning to him. "Why don't you go on the rides?"

Hopper chuckled. "Well, I'm a little too old for this stuff," he tried clarifying. El cocked her head.

"Too old?" she asked. She didn't know you could be too old for fun things.

Joyce came up behind the two, stifling a laugh. "Hey El, I think Hopper's just messing with you. I think he'd actually be thrilled to go on the ferris wheel with you."

El's whole face lit up as she glanced back at Hopper. "Sit with me," she pleaded, and Hopper glared at Joyce but eventually nodded.

"Of course I'll sit with you, kid."

This was the first ride El had not sat next to Mike for. She waved him off as he clambered on the ride before her and Hopper, and she watched in fascination as he and Lucas rose into the air together.

"Next!" she young man manning the ride shouted, and Hopper climbed into the seat next to El, but not after shooting Joyce a dirty look while she and Will, next to go, waved over-enthusiastically as they ascended.

The two sat in comfortable silence, Hopper making sure to look anywhere but down, contrasting El who couldn't stop staring at how the figures below her got smaller and smaller. He watched her eyes in fascination.

When they got to the top, Hopper coughed. "Hey, Ellie?" he asked,

adding the pet name affectionately, beginning to feel more comfortable using it. Only by themselves though, of course. Couldn't have anyone think he's going soft.

El pried her eyes away from the ground and looked up at Hopper. He just took a moment to think about how proud he was. She spent her entire life in confinement and fought for her future while taking care of her friends, despite never having been taken care of in her life. And now she was here, on a ferris wheel, enjoying a classic experience of childhood. Hopper hoped his caregiving was doing justice to her past.

"I'm just proud of you, kid. That's all."

El knew what proud meant from her Nancy Drew books. When someone was proud of you, it means you did something right. El decided Hopper also did a lot of things right. "I'm proud of you too," she returned, and Hopper chuckled.

The group broke for lunch after the ride. El was introduced to corn dogs and chili cheese fries, both of which she devoured, ravenous from the day's activities. Dustin announced that the next ride was to be bumper cars, to give their stomachs time to digest, before they moved onto Steel Force. Max let out a whoop, and El beamed until she saw Mike's pale face picking at his food.

"Mike, what's wrong?" El whispered, but despite her low volume, the rest of the party noticed, joining El in staring concernedly at Mike.

Mike felt the back of his neck break into a sweat at the five pairs of eyes. "Nothing," he insisted through his teeth. "I just had a big breakfast, so I'm not hungry. El, do you want my burger?"

El shook her head. Hopper was always telling El that she needed to eat even when she wasn't hungry for lunch, so she pushed it closer to him. "No," she stated. "You eat."

It did nothing to help his flip-flopping stomach, but Mike obliged to appease El.

Max destroyed them in bumper cars. El caught Jonathan behind the

railing snapping pictures of the laughing teens. “So you can remember this day,” he explained to her afterwards. El decided that was good. She didn’t think she could forget this day, but the pictures were a nice touch.

Max hesitantly approached her as they walked. El smiled at her and linked their arms. Max grinned. “The next one is Steel Force. Are you ready?”

El was so ready.

The ride itself was bright red and looked newer than the others as it shone in the sun. Wooden ramps wove several times to where other park-goers were getting in and out of the cars. The park clearly prepared this ride to have a long ride on busier days, but on this day, there was hardly any.

“Last one to the top is a rotten egg!” Will called and began to speed up the ramp. El hurried after him, not sure how she could become a rotten egg, but knowing that they certainly weren’t pleasant.

She wasn’t particularly fast, as being cooped up in the house didn’t allow her to stretch her legs often, but she found she still beat Mike, who trailed along behind, not appearing anxious to get to the top quickly.

“Mike’s the rotten egg!” Lucas called as he approached. Mike’s face was bright red, a stark contrast to how pale it had been during lunch.

El went up and locked their hands together. He gasped as she leaned in towards his cheek and gave it a peck, a gesture he often did to her but she had never done to him. “Smells better than one,” El decided, and the group burst into laughter. Except for Mike, who was too stunned to move.

The cars came in long rows and sat two next to each other. Max and Lucas rushed to the very front pair of seats, insisting that’s where you got the biggest rush. Dustin and Will disagreed and instead sat all the way in the back.

“Where is the best place to sit?” El inquired to Mike, who shrugged.

"I'm honestly n-not sure, El," he articulated, so they sat directly in the middle.

The great contraption let out a sound of a rush of air, and the party began to slowly, achingly slowly, climb up the tracks.

El again watched the people below her shrink in size until about halfway up, she realized she couldn't feel her fingers. Mike was white-knuckling her grip, eyes squeezed shut.

She gasped. "Mike, what's wrong?" El worried. "Are you sick? Tell me how to fix it!"

Mike shook his head but still refused to open his eyes. "I'm f-fine El," he ground out. El didn't say a word, and he didn't even need to open his eyes to feel the weight of the air between them, one sentence lingering unspoken.

Friends don't lie.

Cautiously, Mike pried open one eye, heart breaking at the panicked way El was looking at him, clearly just wanting to make it better. "Oh God, El," he groaned. "I'm so sorry. Really, I'm so, so sorry. Please don't worry about me; just enjoy the ride, okay? They're really fun and people love them and I'm sure you'll love it too-"

"Mike," El interrupted, waiting for a real explanation. He hadn't answered her questions. He didn't tell her what was wrong.

"I just-" Mike sputtered, "I don't like roller-coasters! I don't understand why people think it's fun to be so far above the ground, and to move so quickly, and to rush *back downwards* to the ground. Like, why don't we all just stay on the ground? I just-I just wanted to be part of this experience for you," he admitted.

"Are you scared?" El bluntly prompted.

Mike swallowed deeply and rested his head against the safety bar in front of them. "Yes," he moaned, defeated.

El was sure about something: there was no reason to be scared because they were safe. And she knew this because her friends would never, *ever* put her in danger.

El squeezed Mike's hand harder, trying to match the intensity that he was holding hers with. "Don't be scared," El explained, as though it was the easiest thing in the world.

And the funny thing was, looking at her like that, for a second, he wasn't.

"El," he choked out, a flood of feelings for this girl hitting him all at once. How could one person have the power to quell his nerves with such ease? "El, I-"

They were interrupted at Lucas and Max, several carts in front of them, let out exhilarated screams, and the next thing Mike knew, he and El were hurtling towards the Earth, their own shouts joining in the madness.

After several drops and loops, the ride stopped, and they were being ushered out to make room for the next riders. El stumbled out of the cart and fell flat on the wooden panels, giggling hard. Mike clambered out next and knelt before her as they laughed until their sides ached. Jonathan took pictures, and Will would later tease Mike for how he looked at El as though she was the sun.

They spent the remaining hours of daylight going at a few more rounds of bumper-cars, Max obviously leaving as the reigning champion, and trying their best at some overpriced games. Max won a game of wack-a-mole, and she gave her plush dog prize to a strongly-blushing Lucas.

At dusk, the adults insisted it was time to leave, and the party dragged their aching feet back to the parking lot, enjoying mostly-silent rides home.

After just several minutes of being back in the car, Joyce turned around to check on the kids, grinned, and tapped Hopper on the shoulder. "Well, would you look at that?" she whispered. Hopper glanced at the rear-view mirror, observing a beaming El supporting a completely passed-out Mike. She was playing with small locks of his hair with a look in her eyes Hopper had never seen before.

"Okay," he silently decided with a bittersweet pang in his heart. "No

one will ever be good enough for her, but the Wheeler kid is the closest thing we'll get."

Roller-coaster: A fun ride where you go high and low and sometimes upside-down. They are safe, and you should not be afraid.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm not even sorry for all the mileven in this chapter
- they are adorable and they deserve all the fluff in
the world lol

7. Forgiveness

Summary for the Chapter:

Did someone say a n g s t?? (But with a happy ending. This is a feel-good fic, after all.)

Notes for the Chapter:

So I finished my stat class today with a 97% and got re-elected as my sorority's philanthropy coordinator last night so why NOT take some time to chill out and write? :)

Thank you bunches to an anon who goes by A Fan for this word! It led perfectly into the next chapter, which was already written and I truly can't wait to put out!

Anyways, hope you like! Enjoy! xox

April 21, 1985

“You’re getting smarter every day, kid. You learn quickly. You’re doing well.”

El was getting close to the point of believing Hopper’s praise.

There were days when she couldn’t remember why she had ever thought so poorly of herself. Her completed workbooks were piling up and advancing in difficulty for every subject: English, mathematics, science, and history. History was her favorite; El loved the idea of reading stories that were long ago a reality.

Hopper came home one day late in the evening, later than he said he would be back. But El had just finished her most recent math workbook, and she was too proud to care about the hour. She greeted him at the door, excitedly proclaiming, “Done!” Hopper took the book from her smaller hands with a promise to check it over as soon

as he had free time.

El beamed as he ruffled her hair, and they ate and watched movies until she fell asleep and Hopper lifted her up and tucked her into bed. He took a moment to watch how her comforter rose and fell around her, an ever-present sign she was safe. Hopper wondered for how much longer he would be able to pick her up and carry her to bed. She was growing like a weed, both up and out as she gained height and put meat on her bones. He shook his head and decided to dwell on such things when he wasn't halfway to being passed out.

Their lives were predictable. Hopper went to work, El studied and entertained herself, and they spend the evenings enjoying each other's company until they had to do it all again the next day. On weekends, they would read together or play board games, and her friends always came over for several hours to "hang out", as they called it.

Their lives drifted through the gentle ebb and flow of quiet, domestic bliss.

At least, until their routine was rudely interrupted.

It was a Friday night, and El was waiting by the window for Mike to arrive, for they had planned a relaxed night of reading and snuggling. El always loved the books Mike brought over; they usually involved things like dragons and fairies and magic: things El knew weren't real but loved to dream of. They would marvel together at the stories as El took the left pages and Mike took the right, until Hopper had to pry him away to return to Karen.

"Five o'clock," Mike had reminded her last weekend before softly grazing her lips.

"Five o'clock," El whispered as she stared out the window. "Five zero zero. Or little hand on five, big hand on twelve."

At half past four, Hopper arrived home, back slightly hunched, sighing heavily as he hung his hat up. El rushed to say hello but was taken aback when his face looked sullen. "Hop?" she questioned nervously. She knew he was often tired after the day, but always

seemed happy to see her.

He gave a weak smile. "Hey, El. I've got a fun idea for tonight, you know? I was thinking we could whip up a couple of triple-decker-eggo-extravaganzas together, and eat them on the couch while we watch some soaps!" His voice was full of insincerity, and he avoided her eyes as though he was hiding something. "That sounds fun, right?"

El wrinkled her eyebrows together and shook her head. "Mike," she reminded Hopper. She gets to see Mike tonight. In only thirty minutes, in fact.

Hopper grimaced with soft eyes. "I'm sorry, kid. Karen called when I was leaving work to tell me he can't come over; the end of the school year is coming up quickly and he needs to study to do well on his final tests." He was able to see the disappointment on her face as clear as day.

"Hey, don't do that, El. I know you wanted to see the Wheeler kid, and I'm sorry. But he really needs to study. We're gonna have a great night anyway, got it?"

El felt like she had been let down, despite knowing it wasn't Hopper's fault that Mike was busy. She shook her head. "Mike," she repeated. Before Hopper could interrupt and try to quell her again, she elaborated, "His name is Mike," and silently escaped to her room.

With a heavy heart, Hopper went to work on the eggo treats, hoping El's sweet tooth might get the better of her later in the evening.

El splayed out on her mattress and stared at her ceiling, contemplating how strange it was that she had lived through three hundred fifty-three days without her friends, but now that she had become addicted to seeing them frequently, one night off made her feel so alone.

She knew how important school was and that Mike needed to study, but she couldn't help herself from pulling on her blindfold and imagining pale, starry skin contrasting with raven eyes. Before she knew it, her consciousness was being pulled from her body and she

found herself in the in-between.

El found that Mike wasn't alone; he was sitting in a circle with the rest of the party, papers spread out haphazardly around the teens. The air around them was still; every set of eyes trained intensely on the problems before them.

Dustin was the one to shatter the silence. "What did you guys get for twenty-three?"

Will mumbled something that sounded like, "Haven't gotten there yet." Max and Lucas gave slight nods, indicating they hadn't finished the problem yet either.

Mike bit his pencil between his teeth, leaving tiny indents in the wood. When he spoke, El noticed a flake of yellow paint in his teeth and sensed a hint of venom in his tone. "We're not supposed to know, yet. That gets covered next week, like right before the test. Obviously."

Dustin just bit his cheek and politely thanked him, but El caught Lucas grumble something unintelligible.

Mike lifted an eyebrow. "Sorry Lucas, what was that?" But El was pretty sure he wasn't genuinely curious; rather, he sounded angry, like he was challenging his friend.

Lucas looked up from his paper, unintimidated. "I said: I know you're pissed you can't see El tonight, but don't take it out on us, man."

El felt bad for her friends, along with feeling bad for herself. She knew Mike had a temper. She had heard him and Hopper fighting the night they were reunited, and she'll never forget how he fearlessly pushed Troy in front of all those people, what seemed like a million years ago. She didn't want Mike to take his upset for not being able to see her out on his friends.

"At least they get to study together," El thought gloomily.

Will startled her. "Wouldn't it be cool if she went to school with us?" he imagined.

A smile twitched on the corner of Mike's mouth, and it made El's heart flutter. "Yeah, when she's ready. I can't wait," he sighed dreamily.

Max made kissy noises and Mike flicked an eraser cap at her, ears beginning to burn.

El closed her eyes and felt her mind rush back into her body. She tore off the blindfold before busying herself around her room, a new idea propelling her.

"*When she's ready*," Mike had said. Well, El was ready *now* .

~X~

Hopper had nearly fallen asleep at the kitchen table, two plates of nauseatingly sweet desserts sitting in front of him. Right before he crossed into slumber, he was startled awake by a loud **thump** on the wood his head rested on.

"Jesus, what-" he sputtered as his eyes shot open, taking in a very excited El and an overwhelming pile of workbooks, topped by her well-loved Word Book. Despite his confusion, he was glad to see El out of her room after how upset she was a few hours earlier. "Hey, kid. What're all these for?"

El stood back and put her hands on her hips triumphantly. "I'm going to school," she explained. "I'm smart," she reminded Hopper, like he had reminded her a million times.

She expected Hopper to smile and tell her what a wonderful idea it was for her to go to school. "*Of course you should go to school, Ellie,*" he should say. "*Look at all these workbooks you've done.*" But El's smile trickled away as Hopper's mouth drew taut, eyes hardening with the authoritative look he reserved for situations when he meant business.

"I don't think that's such a good idea, kid," he broke to her gently.

El shook her head in disbelief. “Why not? Do you see...” she trailed off, gesturing at the hundreds of completed pages she had filled with answers.

Hopper’s gentle tone was replaced by his chief-voice and matched the expression he wore. “Look, we just can’t do that quite yet, kid. For a lot of reasons.”

Disheartened by Hopper’s lack of enthusiasm, she started to feel defensive. “You say I learn quickly,” she stated, finding herself shaking slightly at Hopper’s apparent betrayal. “You say I am doing well. I am ready. I am going to school.”

“You absolutely are not going to school!” Hopper retorted. “You’re not even a legal person! You don’t have the things kids need to go to school. You don’t have a social security number, you don’t even have an identity! Do you know how risky it would be to try to forge those things? Do you know how much danger you would be putting yourself in?”

Bristling with hurt at the realization many of the words Hopper was saying had no meaning to her, El stomped her foot and screamed, “You always talk about danger but you have not protected me from it! I lived in the woods, I fought the demogorgon, and I closed the gate! All you do is stop me!”

Hopper rose from his chair and towered above El, shaking a finger down at her. “You do *not* get to say I haven’t protected you! I feed you, clothe you, keep you warm, teach you, and try to keep you happy! And guess what? If you can’t appreciate it, then you don’t deserve it!”

The plates of eggos crashed into the wall the table was pushed up against and shattered. Hopper was thrust back into his chair, becoming closer to eye level with El, who got right up in his face and with a jerk of her head, pushed his chair back into the table so he couldn’t stand up. Blood was running down her nose and over her lip, the force of the flow amplified by her fury.

“You do not teach me. I teach myself. You don’t have time to teach me because you are always late!”

Hopper's nose wrinkled into a snarl and he ground out, "You wouldn't understand. How could you possibly understand? There is so much still that you don't understand!"

El rose her hand again with the intention of scattering her workbooks every which way, just to emphasize just how much she had in fact learned, but her eyes caught on her workbook sitting at the top of the pile. And as quickly as the fury had come, it left. And she was hollow.

"How could you possibly understand?"

She took a step back, shaking, gaping at the man pinned in his chair. The tears that had welled up in her eyes began to spill as she whispered, "You said I was smart."

Hopper's nose unwrinkled and his fists unballled slightly as he realized the damage he just caused.

El realized he was right: how could she understand? She grew up in a lab; there was so much she still didn't know that there was no way she could ever catch up. No way she could ever go to school. Because she wasn't smart.

The bite returned to her voice cracking as a sob rose in her throat, "You lied!" she screamed before storming off to her room, slamming the door with such force Hopper could hear bits of wood cracking.

The house was too silent. "Oh God," he moaned into his hands before standing up and hurling the chair he had been seated on. What has he done?

~X~

El woke up the next morning understanding she must have cried herself to sleep at some point in the night. Dried mucus ran from her nostrils to her pillow, and her lower lashes were glued to her skin with crusty gunk.

Her heart was still heavy from the previous night. The last time she and Hopper fought, she had to run away and almost kill someone before they were able to be okay again. She had no idea what she would need to do this time.

Because despite what she said last night, Hopper didn't just hold her back. He took care of her; showed her what it was like to have an adult be kind and caring, despite his rough edges. El would never be able to express how grateful she was to him, no matter how hard she tried.

Of course she wouldn't be able to. Because she wasn't smart: she was stupid.

She had no idea what to do with the morning. Should she stay in her room until the weekend was over and Hopper would leave for work? Should she pretend nothing happened? Should she just run away? She didn't want to run away again; she had too much to tie her to here. Now that she knew she could see her friends without putting herself or them in danger, without putting Mike in danger...

She was rudely reminded by her stomach that she hadn't eaten last night. Despite having been able to survive on little food previously, living with Hopper got her accustomed to eating three meals a day (plus dessert), and any deviation from this put her in a bad mood.

Or in this case, in a worse mood.

With a sigh, El admitted defeat to her hunger and cracked her bedroom door open, peering out into the main room, bathed in the early morning sunshine. Hopper wasn't within sight; El decided he must have gone back to his room. He probably didn't want to see her face.

The kitchen table sported her pile of workbooks along with her wordbook, as well as two perfectly good stacks of Eggo extravaganzas. And El wanted one badly, despite the fact they were sure to be stale.

She had every intention to grab the plate and hurry back to the confines of her room, but when she acquired the plate and turned

around, she was startled to find Hopper standing outside his bedroom, staring at her.

The air between the two hung heavily, both parties wanting to speak but not knowing what the right words were.

Hopper broke the spell. "Kid, we need to talk about last night." El agreed; they needed to fix what happened so the awful hurt in her chest would go away, but she had no idea how. She assumed the first step was to stay, so she cautiously sank into a chair and waited for Hopper to elaborate.

Hopper trudged to the table and moved his chair so it was next to El instead of across from her. She slunk into the chair and averted his eyes, tendrils of the anger from last night still burrowed within. Hopper shook his head and coughed. "I owe you an apology, El."

El's eyebrows instinctively raised, but she still was reserved. That wasn't what he expected him to say.

Hopper frowned and hung his head slightly, "Here's the thing, kid: I don't know what I'm doing. I haven't been a...I haven't taken care of a kid in a long time. I'm trying to do you right, and I know it's not good enough."

El felt tears welling again in her eyes. It was plenty good enough. Everything she had was owed to the people who took care of her: her friends, Joyce, and Hop. She cleared her throat and tried to speak correctly. "I'm...glad. I'm glad for you, Hop," she explained, hoping the chief understood what she meant. She meant that it was plenty good enough. She was grateful. She appreciated everything.

"No, it's absolutely not enough. And I'm going to do better, okay? I was thinking last night. The reason I can't send you to school isn't because of being smart or not. You are so smart, kiddo. I know you have trouble believing that, but I really am amazed at how far you've come, and how far you're going to go."

El found her tears spilling over and Hopper reached over and held her tightly. "It's just not safe yet; that's the truth. I don't know how I would forgive myself if-

“Hop, stop.” El sniffled into his sleeve. “No school.”

Hopper nodded slowly. “No school,” he agreed. “But I was thinking last night, and I’m going to make it up to you, okay? And I’m going to do everything I can to get you to school eventually. Not this fall, but maybe the next. I’ve got an idea, and I think you’re really going to like it if it works.”

Hopper couldn’t help but cry along with her. He was in too deep; he was becoming a dad again.

“Can you forgive me, kid? I swear I’m gonna do better.”

El wiped her nose on her arm and pulled away from her surrogate dad. “What is forgive?” she asked. And she didn’t feel stupid asking.

Hopper wiped his own eyes. “Forgiveness is when someone hurts you, but you decide to make up with them and move on. Can you forgive me, if I promise to do better?”

Promise. El believed in promises.

“Yes,” she decided. “Can you forgive me?”

Hopper chuckled. “Already have, Ellie.”

El moved Hopper’s chair back to its rightful place as Hopper took each plate of eggo goodness and microwaved them, making the candies melty and the waffles a bit softer again. They ate in content silence as El copied her new word into her Word Book.

Forgiveness: What you give someone when they hurt you but you want to be okay with them again. It makes you feel much better.

Notes for the Chapter:

Ahhhhh I'm so excited for the next chapter!!! It's actually been written for a while (before the last couple of chapters, in fact). I wonder what Hopper's

idea is...

8. Tutor

Summary for the Chapter:

This was actually done before I received these suggestions, but A Fan (anon) and CuteCalamity seemed to also want this word. :D Thanks, guys!

I'm in the thick of finals and will be for the next week, so don't expect every 2-3 day updates until that's over, sorryyyyy. Gotta get the degree (and dean's list pls omg I want it), ya feel?

Enjoy! I hope you love reading this chapter as much as I loved writing it. xox

May 14, 2017

"I'm going to make it up to you, okay?" Hopper had said.

El thought Hopper already had made it up to her. Her friends came over the next weekend for a full day, Hopper gave her new stickers to put up on her walls (he still couldn't bear to tell her how it destroyed the paint), and he was home on time more often than not. They once again lived in harmony.

But El realized he wasn't done when on the last day of her friends' school year, Hopper gently shook her awake before he left for work. "Kid, I need you to clean up the house for me before I get back, alright? And then I've got a surprise for you." Before she could ask any questions, Hopper was gone.

El wanted to catch another hour of slumber, but the anticipation for her surprise kept her awake.

If her surprise relied on having a clean house, El was going to make it sparkle. She washed and dried the dishes, a technique she was still yet to quite master based on how Hopper chuckled when she used too much soap. She swept the floors, put away her novels and

workbooks, and spent the afternoon curled up on the couch with butterflies in her stomach until she drifted into a nap.

She awoke to the secret knock being rapped on the front door. El shook the sleep out of her head and burst open the door, not willing to wait another second for Hopper to hide the surprise from her. And Hopper was there on the doorstep, an armful of thick books. But he wasn't alone.

In all his gravity-defying-haired glory, was Steve, also sporting several books along with spiral notebooks and binders.

El cocked her head at Hopper, silently imploring him to explain why Steve would be at their cabin; she hadn't seen the older boy since she closed the gate.

Hopper nodded towards Steve and rose his eyebrows, and El caught his wordless reminder to mind her manners. "Hello, Steve," she greeted neutrally, and Steve grinned.

"Hey, kiddo. Long time no see, am I right?" He had warm eyes and a funny smile. Dustin talked sometimes about how cool he was, citing vivid stories about how he beat up dema-dogs and protected Max and the others from Billy, someone El had not yet met and didn't particularly want to.

Hopper patted Steve on the shoulder. "Come on in," he invited, and he sat onto the couch, gesturing for Steve to join. El followed but remained standing. Of course she was glad to see Steve; she was always happy to have company. But she didn't know him terribly well, and she still had no idea what he was doing here.

The trio waited in silence for someone to speak first. In the end, it was Hopper, who cleared his throat and parted his hands. "Look, El. I told you I wanted to do the right things for you. I wish...I wish I could be home all the time to teach you so you can get caught up in your studies, but I can't. Someone's gotta make the money so we don't freeze in the winter." El watched the side of Steve's mouth turn up.

She tried to put the pieces together. "So Steve is going to stay home

with me?" she suggested. It didn't sound like that bad of an idea; Dustin said Steve was cool and was nice to hang out with.

"Well, sometimes. But he's gonna do a bit more than that - he's going to tutor you. He's done with school and needs a job, so he's going to spend Tuesdays and Thursdays working part-time down at the station with me, and Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays teaching you. Hopefully teaching you better than I'm able to," he added with a slight shrug.

El didn't know what a tutor was, but she knew what teaching was, so she tried to put two and two together. "Tutor...is a teacher?" she asked.

Hopper glanced over at Steve with a twinkle in his eye. "Your first lesson?" he prompted.

Steve smiled smoothly and looked El directly in the eye. He did epitomize what El thought Dustin meant by "cool". "Well, a tutor isn't exactly a teacher. A teacher knows more than I do, but I'd like to think I know middle school lessons-" Hopper interrupted with another stifled laugh. "Chief was telling me how badly you want to go to school with your friends, and I want to help catch you up so you can go to school with them next fall. Not this fall - it's going to take longer than that - but hopefully the one after that. If you work really hard. And if you let me tutor you."

El took a moment to process. "I would like that," she decided with a timid grin.

She took Steve to her room and showed him the oak desk she did her workbooks on. Steve added the ones he brought to her collection and placed them on her bookshelf. "These books have all the information you'll need to learn to be ready to take the entrance exam for school next year. Every day, I'm going to teach you a little more from the books and give you homework to do for the next time I'm back. Do you know what homework is?"

El nodded proudly, appreciative that Steve thought to ask instead of just assuming she knew things she may not.

“Good. Now, every time I give you homework, you have to have it done by the time you see me next. No if’s, and’s or but’s about it. Got it?”

El beamed. “Got it.” She knew her friends weren’t thrilled about their homework, but she couldn’t be more thankful. She would do everything she could to learn and grow, and to eventually go to school with her friends.

“I imagine you’re going to learn quickly, judging by the materials you’re going through now and what I’ve heard about you,” Steve remarked, hair bobbing as he scanned her shelf of books. El radiated under the praise.

“So, I know the boys - and Max - are on summer break. I’m not gonna make you study this summer as much as you’re going to need to during the school year, but we will still be working to make sure you’re ready. Still Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. But we’ll have fun too; I’m a cool tutor, okay? And a damn good babysitter.” El followed as his eyes wandered over the growing collection on her bookshelf, half of the works being from the library and needing to go back in a couple weeks. His gaze stopped on her Word Book.

“What’s this?” Steve asked, picking up the binder.

El took it from him. “My word book. Hop gave it to me, and I write words I learn.”

Steve gave an understanding nod and rose his eyebrows. “Impressive. Good idea. Can I take a look at it with you now?”

El was still just a tad sheepish over the book, but Steve grabbed an additional chair from the kitchen and they skimmed through the pages, going through the words alphabetically. Steve gave an impressed huff of air. “This is really cool, kid.”

They got to the letter T. Telegraph, tornado, tally, troll, team-

“Wait,” El interrupted their reading and took out a pencil.

Tutor: Someone who teaches but is not a teacher. Steve is my tutor.

Steve put a hand over his heart in a mock swoon. "I'm honored," he dramatically crooned, and El giggled and closed the binder.

"Alright, do you want to get started right away?" Steve prompted. El nodded.

"Great. Let's start with math."

Notes for the Chapter:

S T E V E

Look babysitter! Steve is my favorite thing so I NEEDED it but also I feel like Hopper would be happy to have him work at the station, and ya know he's gotta start working on something that can also function as a long term career, amirite? xox

9. Heaven

Summary for the Chapter:

HA JUST KIDDING I'M BACK ALREADY bc I high-key emailed my professor about how lazy my group in this class was all year when contributing towards our projects and I'm NERVOUS ABOUT IT.

ANYway, this was not a suggested word, but I n e e d e d it. I hope you like! xox

June 7, 1985

El stood beside Hopper at the front door of the Byers' residence, the sun shining warmly on her back. Today she had chosen the dress she had bought while shopping with Nancy, and Hopper had only let her leave the house in it after he made her promise that she wouldn't sit cross-legged while with her friends. El had complied with a role of her eyes, a gesture she had picked up from Lucas. The party had arranged to play a game of Dungeons and Dragons, and Joyce had insisted the teens come to her house instead of going to the cabin, citing the abundance of leftover cake from Will's recent birthday. For reasons El didn't quite understand, Hopper found it very important that he joined.

"Remember your manners," Hopper reminded her what seemed like the millionth time that day. They had been working on those; she was learning to say please and thank you instead of just demanding and taking. Those skills were easier. The harder ones were remembering to greet people when she sees them, as well as not wandering wherever she felt like going.

El knocked on the door. One of Hopper's lessons in manners had been to always knock before entering a residence.

Joyce appeared on the other side with a grin. "Hello, Mrs. Byers," El greeted, and Joyce placed a hand over her heart and gave Hopper an approving nod.

“Hi, sweetie! Come on in, the both of you. How are you, El?” They followed Mrs. Byers to the kitchen, and El watched hungrily as she pulled a huge amount of sheet cake from the fridge. She lost her train of thought only for it to be returned by a gentle nudge from Hopper.

El regained her focus. “I’m happy,” she answered and paused. “How are you?” she added, recalling how Hopper explained asking how the other person was is also very polite.

“I’m wonderful, thanks for asking, honey.” She set the cake down and cut out a slice to plate and hand to El. “Jonathan and your friends’ll be back in a bit. He called from the arcade to let me know Dustin and Max are in an intense competition at the moment,” she explained with a subtle grin.

El sunk slightly into her chair. It wasn’t as though she wasn’t happy to spend time with Joyce and Hopper, but she really wanted to see Mike and her friends. Like, right now. But at the moment, she would settle for cake.

The light blue icing melted on her tongue in a puddle of artificial goodness. “Heavens, do those kids love the arcade,” Hopper mumbled with an amused huff of breath.

El took another forkful of the confection and absentmindedly asked, “What’s heaven?” She continued chewing contently as she waited for a response, realizing after a few long, wordless moments that Hopper and Joyce were looking at each other with bewilderment.

“Well, kid. Now that’s a loaded question,” Hopper responded with a slight shake of his head.

Joyce looked from El to Hopper and back to El, and brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “What Hop means by that, sweetie,” she started and spread her hands, “is that we don’t really know. No one really knows. But people like to make guesses about what it is.”

El had fully realized by now that the topic was clearly far more heavyset than she could have anticipated, but Hop’s and Joyce’s vagueness was peaking her curiosity. “What are the guesses?” El pushed a bit.

Hopper pursed his lip and looked to Joyce with a silent plea for her to take this one. “Well, people think that it’s a really wonderful place. A place with no sadness or hurt. We don’t know what...what it looks like or anything, but we like to imagine that it’s beautiful.”

El closed her eyes and tried to imagine this supposed “heaven”. A beautiful place with no hurt. In her mind, she envisioned a lush garden, full of things she thought were beautiful like flowers and tall, green trees. No hurt, too? She thought of the comfort that washed over her body when Mike had hugged her in this exact same house several months ago, for the first time in a year. She remembered the gentle, serene rise and fall of Hopper’s chest as she rested on him while the pair watched soaps until bedtime. She recalled the radiating feeling of pride when Steve told her she was smart, the warmth that overcame her when Dustin called her giggle cute, the serene lulls of her visit to Will when she would just happily sit and listen, and the way her muscles relaxed unconsciously when she finally understood Max liked Lucas and not Mike.

She hummed contentedly. “I’d like to go to heaven,” she remarked and soundlessly imagined visiting this amazing place with Mike. She could pick him one of the flowers-

“What, no!” Joyce exclaimed, and El’s gaze shot up at her in alarm at the outburst. Why shouldn’t she want to visit heaven? It sounded lovely.

Joyce let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Sorry, honey. Didn’t mean to startle you.” She rubbed her temples absentmindedly. “It’s just...heaven isn’t one of those places we can visit. It’s a place you stay in forever after you...” she searched for the right words. “After you’re gone,” she finished.

Gone. El knew “gone” very well. Barb was gone. When she had seen her in the flesh, it had been quite evident by her lifeless body. And Hopper had told her in the car ride to the Hawkins facility that he had a little girl, El presumed a daughter, who was gone. And Joyce had a person who was gone too. His name was Bob, as Will explained one night. He had been a good man.

El raised her chin thoughtfully as a somber tone coated the

atmosphere around the trio. She understood now; she couldn't go to heaven because she would have to be gone, and she didn't want to be gone.

A sudden flicker of a comforting thought struck El, and she turned to Hopper and tentatively asked, "Is your...little girl...in heaven?"

Hopper turned to look her directly in the eye and held her gaze intensely for several moments before nodding slightly. "Yeah, kid. Yeah, she is."

El thought again of what she imagined heaven was like. Beautiful things everywhere, flowers and bright blue skies, warmth from the sun kissing your skin at all times. Happiness, comfort, contentment, joy.

"She must be so happy," El pondered. Hopper and Joyce exchanged a stunned glance at each other.

"Wh-what do you mean, honey?" Joyce asked.

"You say heaven is wonderful. I imagine heaven is perfect. No one can be sad in heaven."

There was another long pause. In the silence, El thought about a lively little girl, running across valleys with flowers in her hair, long strands of grass tickling her bare feet with each step. Barb was there, too. El imagined she would treat the little girl with kindness and love, judging from what Nancy said about her. And Bob, who Will insisted had been a funny, joyful man, would be there too, making them laugh.

She was interrupted by Hopper folding her into his arms. "Yeah," he simply agreed, and Joyce placed a hand on both their backs.

Just then, the door swung open and El could hear the chatter of her friends, their absurd volume jolting her from the moment. Hopper and Joyce released her, and she turned around in time to avoid seeing Joyce wipe at her eyes.

Will rushed into the room. "Hi, Mom!" I beat Lucas at pinball today!" He fell into his mom's open arms for a quick hug (something he never

took for granted anymore), and then quickly scooped up the platter of the remaining cake on the counter..

“Hi Mrs. Byers! Hi Chief! Hey El!,” Dustin greeted briefly and then turned to Will, eyes widening at the sight of the desert. “I’ll get the plates and forks!” The boys rushed to the basement with their supplies. Max and Lucas didn’t seem to notice the adults or El, deep in a debate over the merits of different pinball games as they followed the two boys down the steps.

Mike rushed in last, clutching the Dungeons and Dragons supplies. “Seriously, guys? Just going to leave me to carry-” he abruptly stopped upon laying eyes on El in her new dress. He stared for a moment to admire how the colors made her eyes seem so warm. They both flushed in silence until Hopper coughed, and Mike realized the Chief was there and began to stammer.

“S-sorry! I just-. El! Let’s go!” he babbled and went to join the teens after a wave goodbye to Hop and Joyce.

Halfway down the basement steps, Mike leaned in towards the girl he adored and couldn’t resist leaving a quick kiss on her cheek. “You look beautiful,” he admitted and rushed ahead of her.

El wondered if Mike thought she was prettier than the flowers she imagined blooming in heaven.

Heaven: A place you go when you are gone. Heaven is wonderful, beautiful, and has no hurt.

Notes for the Chapter:

Look I needed a dose of Mileven fluff in this chapter.
Not enough to give you cavities - just enough to
make you need to brush your teeth. Don't forget to
floss!

xox

10. Bee sting

Summary for the Chapter:

Thank you so much, jackaboyblu, for recommending "bee sting"! I wrote this in intervals as I studied for my meteo exam that I've got tomorrow (at 8 AM, gross).

Please enjoy some lazy summertime fluff! xox

June 15, 1985

Despite the hazy warmth that made El and her friends want to laze around and do nothing all summer, Steve insisted on an intensive study regime. Even though the party was now together at least every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, and sometimes El wanted nothing more than to do absolutely nothing in their company, she was thankful for Steve holding her to such high standards. It made her feel capable. If Steve thought she could complete so much work and advance so quickly, then maybe she could.

The woods surrounding the cabin was lush, having swelled to life with the transition to summer. Every tree provided a blessed, shaded relief from the smoldering heat, and El found she loved to lean against their trunks and enjoy what the surrounding nature had to offer while being protected from sunburning.

Sometimes when Steve would come over to tutor her, they would study under the trees instead of inside the house. All El had to do was make sure not to get distracted by passing wildlife, an assurance she only maintained half the time. When her friends would come over to hang, Hopper would allow the party to venture to trees bordering the cabin, as long as he could see them from the window.

Thus, on this hot Saturday morning, the teens found themselves lying on untrimmed grass shaded by a great oak tree, conversation lazily drifting amongst themselves. Mike had tentatively laid his head on

El's lap. She hummed in contentment, one hand flipping through her Word Book, the other combing absentmindedly through Mike's dark locks, which were arguably beginning to curl just as quickly as he was growing.

One piece of homework Steve always gave her was to learn three new words every day, and to write down the word (spelled correctly, he emphasized), and its definition in her own words. These words couldn't be from the lessons Steve gave, but she could learn them any other way: through talking with others, through books she read for pleasure, through experiences, anything else.

"You also need to learn everyday words just by living your normal life, you know?" Steve had explained. El agreed.

Conversations with her friends were great ways to learn new words. She had insisted to them that they stop restricting their vocabulary, so she can fulfill her homework duties. Mike had beamed at that, sincerely praising her, "Look at you. You're already a great student."

El tuned into the chatter around her, continuing to stroke Mike's hair although she was pretty sure at this point he had fallen asleep. "I'm just saying, maybe don't get your hopes up too high. The third movie in a series is usually where it goes downhill," Lucas explained.

Dustin threw his hands into the air from his position of lying flat on his back. "I don't know how you can be this skeptical! I can't wait for it to come out."

Max snorted. "You're just super into Carrie Fisher."

"No!" Dustin retorted. "I mean, yeah, have you seen Princess Leia? But c'mon guys, I know you're as excited for Return of the Jedi as I am."

Will lied on his stomach, using his folded arms as a pillow. He moved the side of his head he rested on to look at Dustin. "Dude, obviously we're all super excited to see it. They're just messing with you. Unless," he smirked at Lucas. "Lucas just isn't as big of a Star Wars fan as the rest of us."

“Excuse you? Who here was the first to see the original five years ago?”

El continued browsing through her binder, and in her daze tossed in her two cents, her knowledge of Star Wars becoming vaster due to her friend's insistence she be exposed to the movies many times. “The Empire Strikes Back was better than the first one. So the next one should be better than the second one.” She twiddled a strand of dark hair between two fingers and pointedly looked at Dustin. “And Carrie Fisher is pretty.”

Dustin grinned with his fresh set of teeth at the confirmation as Will nodded in agreement. Whether he agreed with El's prediction or her opinion on Carrie Fisher, the party wasn't sure.

Will lolled his head back to the other side, probably to make a comment to El, but instead openly laughed at the sight of Mike's sleeping face on El's lap, his mouth slightly opened as his chest gently rose and fell.

Max huffed out a good-hearted giggle. “Oh my god, El, look at your man. He's asleep in the middle of the day, in broad daylight.”

Will propped his head up on one hand. “He's breathing through his mouth. He's a literal-”

“Mouthbreather,” Dustin finished with a chuckle.

El didn't like those words but knew by the joking tones of her friends that they were just kidding. Lucas gained a gleam in his eyes and moved to his knees from his spot between Will and Max and began to scooch towards El and Mike. He plucked a single blade of grass from beneath him as El watched, fascinated.

She was abruptly torn from her interest when she felt a tickle on her arm and looked down to find a fat, fluffy honey bee resting on her skin. She smiled softly. She didn't know much about bees, but she had seen them often buzzing between wildflowers scattered outside the cabin, and so Hopper had told her what they were called. The creature slowly made its way down her wrist, and its feather-light touches on the sensitive area over her veins made her giggle.

El returned to trying to figure out what Lucas was doing. He reached the spot where she and Mike were situated, and the other party members held their breath as he softly dragged the grass over Mike's nose. A faint hush of anticipation fell over El's friends as Mike slightly wrinkled his nose and closed his mouth, and El thought it gave his freckles the appearance of dancing.

Lucas brushed the grass over Mike's face again, and this time he mumbled something like, "Hello there," before turning his head the other direction so Lucas could no longer get a good view of his face. But El's view had improved. She thought Mike had never looked more beautiful.

In his slumber, he squirmed and eventually nuzzled himself slightly further up El's body. This promptly caused the rest of the party to let out a series of half-mocking "Aww"s.

The abrupt noise must have stirred Mike, and he flailed out an arm that landed right by El's wrist. This would have made the cooing get worse, if El hadn't yelped in surprise as something pinched his wrist and her eye's widened at the sudden pain.

Her whole body startled briefly, and that along with the absence of El's arm against Mike's as she brought it up to examine what happened, caused his eyes to snap open. "Huh? Wha-El?" he blinked himself awake.

Every one of the party members had immediately rushed to El, but Will made his way there first, sensing her distress before hearing it. He took her arm and scanned the area with a slightly furrowed brow. Instinctively, her mind resorting quickly to her previous life, and she yanked her arm away to have a look for herself. There was no visible wound. In fact, the only presence to indicate anything had ever happened was a tiny, slightly swollen, pink bump of flesh.

As her panic settled, she remembered where she was, and met the concerned eyes of her friends and Mike. Embarrassedly, she stuck her arm out again for Will, who she knew understood and wouldn't make a big deal out of it. He tilted his head an inch and gently gave El back her arm.

“It looks like a bee sting. It’s nothing to worry about, El.”

Mike shot up. “A bee sting? How’d you get that? Are you okay?” Will shot Mike a dirty look, worried Mike would undo the calm he was trying to instill in El. Mike swallowed. “I mean, of course you’re okay. Sorry, El. I’m just sleepy.”

El crinkled up her face and stared at the inflamed spot on her wrist. “A bee..hurt me?” she whispered in confusion. They were such pretty, soft creatures. Why would they hurt her?

Max took her hand. “Bees sting when they get startled, usually when something starts moving towards it quickly. In this case, I think that *something* was Mike’s head.”

Mike scoffed, offended, quick temper getting the best of him. “Are you kidding me, Max? Are you really going to insinuate that I would do something to hurt my girlfrie-”

“You didn’t mean to, Mike. You were just cuddling up to El in your sleep,” Dustin assured. “You’re lucky it didn’t sting you in the face, instead.”

Mike wished it had.

He looked at El and took the hand Max had just dropped. “Shit, El. I’m sorry. It was an accident. Promise.”

El hated the way Mike looked like he had been kicked. Her wrist didn’t even hurt anymore. She didn’t even care about the sting. She just needed Mike to stop looking so sad.

But she knew she wasn’t very good with words, so she looked for a distraction instead.

She only needed one more word today to finish Steve’s assignment.

“How do you spell ‘sting’?” El asked Mike with a soft smile. Mike felt himself positively melt, and he flung his arm around El, bewildered for the millionth time at how kind El was, and how lucky that made him.

Bee sting: A sting a bee gives you when you scare it. It hurt a little at first, and then not at all.

Notes for the Chapter:

Headcanon: Hopper didn't see El get stung because he was deeply engrossed in a soap.

I need to write something confirming a Hopper-soap addiction.

xox

11. Seashell

Summary for the Chapter:

Here's to elandhop for the word suggestion! I'd been looking to write some beach fluff.

xox

Notes for the Chapter:

Anyone else notice that like everyone seems to have finals this week (including myself) WHICH means no one is writing WHICH means we don't have as much stuff to read to calm us down from finals WHICH means we get more stressed WHICH means even less writing happens??? HA ISNT THAT FUNNY AMIRITE

It's cool it's cool. I've gotta keep writing to give myself breaks so HERE I AM.

Good luck to anyone else going through finals! I believe in you!

July 30, 1985

Despite that Mike and Hopper didn't often speak to each other, and when they were, they were often butting heads, they shared one common goal: provide El with experiences she deserved but never had. It was the reason Mike trudged along to the amusement park and rode a roller-coaster, even though he was deathly afraid of the structures. It was the reason Hopper let her sunbathe in the cabin's surrounding woods with her friends, and the reason he only quietly tutted and handed her aloe when one day, El trudged back into their home pink and itchy. And it was the reason they both constantly pushed themselves to be better people, because she deserved the world.

Those were the reasons. She was the reason.

One day, when El was visiting Will through the in-between, her eyes drifted from her friend to a framed photo situated on his headboard. In the picture were four figures: one small child with Will's eyes, a boy with raggedy hair who looked to be just under Will's current age, a younger-looking Joyce, and a man she did not recognize. The photo was black and white but bordered in colorful print, large bubble letters spelling out "Hello From Paradise!"

Will had been talking about an in-progress piece he was working on in art class, but paused when he noticed El wasn't listening anymore. He followed her gaze to the photo.

"Oh, yeah. That's an old picture. Mom, Jonathan, and I were on vacation at the beach, and a photographer asked if he could take a picture of us to use for a postcard. It was actually really nice." He made no mention of the man in the picture. "Wait. Do you know what a beach is?"

El did know what a beach was. In a recent writing lesson from Steve, she had to look at drawings of beaches and make up a story to go with the pictures. Steve had given her an explanation of beaches so she had enough background knowledge to write it. He explained that beaches were connected to the ocean, which held an amount of water bigger than anyone could possibly imagine. Instead of pavement, grass, or dirt, you walked on sand, which was actually teeny tiny pieces of rocks. People would play or relax on the beach. It was a special kind of place for most people.

El had written a story of her and Steve visiting the beach together. Steve gave her an A+.

"El?" Will prompted, having not received a response to his question.

El collected herself and refocused her attention back on her friend. "Yes. I know."

Will smiled and lied back on his bed. El scooted closer to his headboard so she could get a better look at the picture. Will spoke again. "It really was a lot of fun. And very pretty. The ocean makes waves, and when they crash they make a nice sound. And the sun feels warm on your face, and after you walk around in the sand all

day, your feet get really smooth.”

That night, El dreamed of the black and white photo reinvented in color.

So of course, when El told Hopper about her happy dream, he knew what he was obligated to do.

“A *one-piece*,” he emphasized to Nancy the next day. “None of that bikini nonsense, okay?”

Nancy chuckled softly. “Got it, Chief,” she reassured him as El practically pulled her out the door, ecstatic to gather everything she needed for her upcoming road trip.

Hopper considered reserving the day for just the two of them, but couldn’t push away the fond memories he held of stupid teenage adventures at the beach with his friends (a couple of them involving a high-school Joyce).

This was about making sure El had the experiences she deserved.

“I’m taking taking off work on Friday and taking El to the beach. Will and all those kids should come along,” he told Joyce at the grocery store with a huff.

Joyce stopped her cart and looked at Hopper in teasing awe. “Hopper, are you taking your little girl and her friends on a beach day?”

Hopper pushed his cart ahead of Joyce’s. “Shut it,” he grumbled gently, even though she was right.

The day before the outing, Hopper grabbed a set of keys from behind Florence’s desk when she turned around for only a moment. “Hey!” she called after him once she realized what he had done. “Where are you off to with the van?”

“Don’t worry about it!” Hopper called back, and left the station with a vehicle large enough to house a zoo of children.

And house a zoo of children it did. Bright and early the next morning,

El was seated in shotgun next to the chief as they picked up the party members one by one. Dustin's house was the last they arrived at, and he ran out of the home with huge brown bags in either hand, excitedly explaining to El how he made sure to bring all the proper beach food, in addition to some Eggos just because. El hadn't known there was food specifically made for eating at a beach, and this notion excited her.

The hour-long drive to the Indiana National Lakeshore felt painfully slow to El. Mike watched her carefully from his position behind the driver's seat, and told stories of his childhood trips to the beach to entertain her as well as the others. Years of acting as Dungeon Master had increased his storytelling ability by tenfold, and soon all of the teens plus Hopper were mesmerized in what should have been mundane memories, but instead were weaved to seem fantastical.

"We used to fly to the gulf coast every summer to see my grandparents. That beach is a little different than the one we're going to because at the gulf, the water is full of salt and makes waves taller than...Hopper." Everyone laughed at that imagery. "The one we're going to today has fresh water because it's connected to a lake instead of an ocean. It'll be clear and blue. You'll see soon."

El decided soon couldn't come soon enough.

After what seemed like forever, Hopper pulled into a parking spot in a half-full lot, the car facing away from the shore. "Close your eyes, Ellie," Hopper dictated gently, and El cautiously obliged. She heard the other doors open and close. Eventually hers opened, and El felt Hop's callused hand slip into hers. With her eyes still closed, she hopped out of the car anxiously. Mike slipped a hand over each of her eyes, not sure if she would be able to keep them closed, judging by how she was joyfully rocking on her feet.

"Okay, open em," Hopper said, and Mike removed his hands as El blinked open her eyes.

Trees and the longest grass El had ever seen lined a wide trailway covered in what El presumed to be sand. The terrain was hilly on either side of her, but it looked like the pathway led to a smoother plane. In the distance, El could see the glimmering blue expanse of

the lake. It was brighter and bigger than the water at the quarry near home.

Her friends around her were ripping off their shoes to dig their toes into the sand underneath them, so El copied their actions. When she slipped her first sandel off and placed her foot gingerly back to the ground, she gasped. The sand moved slightly under her foot, still supporting her while spilling slightly over the tips of her toes.

“Feels funny, doesn’t it?” Lucas remarked. El nodded. But it was kind of a pleasant funny. She took off her second shoe and planted herself firmly onto the sand. When she let go of Hopper’s hand and went to take a step forward, the sand seemed to further shift.

Mike, mesmerized by El’s wonder, completely forgot about Hopper’s presence claimed El by the waist as she stumbled forward slightly. “You’re doing great, El,” he praised, and let go of her hips to instead hold her by both hands. “Honestly, a few more practice steps, and you’ll get it.”

El walked forwards as Mike walked backwards. She let out a stiff breath with the realization the sand beneath her was still going to support her, despite moving around. When her steps turned more confident, Mike slowly released her hands and let her move on her own. “See? You got it!”

Max having moved from California, seemed remarkably comfortable, as though she was coming home. Red hair whipped in the lazy breeze, and she gazed at the others with sparkling eyes. “Come on, slowpokes!”

Hopper held El back for a moment before she could take off with her friends. “Remember, stay where-”

“Where you can see me,” El finished with a grin, and made her way quickly down the trail with Mike. Hopper trudged along behind with his armful of towels.

Seemingly abruptly, the trail gave way to an open expanse of beach both left and right of El. When she turned around, she could see mountains in the distance. Other beachgoers lounged in the sun, and

children splashed in the lake.

The lake.

It was a bigger mass of water than El could have imagined. It went so far that she couldn't even see where it ended. So much water. So much water.

El reached out and grabbed Mike's hand in alarm. "Mike," she whisper-shouted. Mike turned around to look at her and rose his eyebrows in confusion for a moment after El pointed at the lake, until he understood and squeezed her hand back firmly.

"No," he emphasized with a shake of his head. "Not even close to the same." He knew she was thinking about the bath back at the lab. The bath was a place of hurt and destruction, forced to be at the hands and mind of El. He knew she still had bad dreams of being submerged in the tank.

He had an idea. "Let me show you something," he decided and pulled El's hand to move her forwards, but she held her place firmly and shook her head. Mike furrowed his eyebrows and turned around again to face her, taking the other hand as well.

"Hey," he coaxed. "El. I'm not going to let anything hurt you," he assured, although they both knew El was more than capable of taking care of herself and could protect Mike more easily than he could protect her. But Mike knew, and El knew too, that there was one thing he could protect her from that she couldn't protect herself from, and it lied in the deep recesses of her mind.

El felt as if Mike's dark eyes were pushing their way inside her mind in some otherworldly way, and she found herself nodding and allowing herself to be led to where the mostly-still water lapped at the edge of the shore.

"One step in?" Mike suggested. "If we just get a little bit in, maybe just to your ankles, and stay really still, I'm sure we'll see it," he said confidently as he took the step into the water first. See what?

El followed tentatively, pleasantly surprised at how the cool of the

lake soothed her and provided a welcome contrast to the scalding heat of the sunshine.

One more step. Two more steps. Toes are covered. Ankles in.

“Okay, now stay really still,” Mike instructed, and El obliged, tuning into the joyful laughter of her friends in the distance. She turned her head slightly to see what they were doing, and found they had all shed their outerwear to be left in their swimwear, and were currently engaged in some sort of game that involved sitting on someone else’s shoulders and pushing each other.

El was contemplating if she was supposed to kick off her shirt and shorts or not, when Mike gasped and pointed to the water in front of them. “There! Do you see them, El?”

At first, as El’s eyes adjusted to looking through the glassy water, she couldn’t tell what Mike was talking about. But soon small, wiggly creatures came into focus and El could see them darting around the water together.

“What are those?” El asked Mike.

Mike beamed. “El, those are tadpoles, also known as baby frogs.” El’s eyes shone.

“Babies?” she asked incredulously.

Mike smiled. “Yeah, baby frogs. They were born in this lake, and they’ll grow up here.” El stared at the swimming little creatures, mesmerized by how they seemed to move together. “This water is full of life. Life is made here. It’s really amazing.”

Mike was right. This was not like the bath. And El wanted to join it.

She stepped out of the lake and wriggled out of her shorts. She was pulling off her shirt just as Mike turned around to see what she was doing, and he nearly fell into the water at the sudden appearance of the red polka-dotted one-piece.

He choked on nothing when El gestured towards her friends. Max had just pushed Will from his position atop Dustin, and they all hollered

and laughed heartily when he came back up to the surface.

“D-do you want to play?” Mike asked, and El nodded.

From his towel several yards away, Hopper instinctively clenched his hands into loose fists when Mike shed his shirt and led El up to her knees in the water before kneeling and allowing her to gain her balance on his shoulders. Hopper let out a huff but then went back to reading his book.

Dustin explained the simple rules of the game that El learned was called “chicken”, and she and Mike were first up against Will and Dustin. Neither Will or El really wanted to push the other into the water, but the cheers from the others eventually got them into the spirit of the game, and they each managed to push the other off one time. Dustin jokingly accused El of using her powers to push Will off, but they all knew she wouldn’t.

The rounds went on for some time, Lucas and Max emerging from the tournament as the champions by far.

When the sun peaked directly above them, the party made their way out of the water to enjoy the refreshments Dustin had brought: sandwiches, chips, sodas, and plenty of water. El crinkled her nose every time she took a sip of her Coke, having never quite acclimated to the funny sensation soda invoked. Mike kissed her nose to unwrinkle it.

After lunch, Lucas took out some brightly colored plastic containers. “These are for building castles out of sand,” he explained. He told his friends he had stolen them from his little sister. There was absolutely no chance he’d admit he honestly just liked building sandcastles, still.

What was a nostalgic experience for the other teens was a first experience for El, and as they created the structure, Mike wove a story of each of their Dungeons and Dragons characters combating evil at the castle.

Will, who had momentarily returned to the shoreline, reappeared with a rattling pail. “Guys, I found some seashells!”

El took one of the shells out of the bucket. It was smooth and black on one side, and hollowed on the other. “What is a seashell?” El wondered, turning the object in her hand.

“Well,” Max started. “It’s not exactly a seashell, because we’re at a lake instead of the sea. But a lot of people call them seashells anyway, which is fine,” she explained, Californian knowledge of course reigning supreme above what the other Indiana natives knew. “Basically, a little animal used to live in here. Pretty cool, right?” El did think it was cool. They decorated the castle with the seashells, and El made sure to claim one as her own before they made their way back to the car at sunset.

Over the radio on the drive home, Hopper asked her if she liked the beach. El beamed and nodded. “Thank you,” she earnestly replied.

Back at the cabin, she ran herself a shower and cleansed of the sand that seemed to stick in every crevice. She tried off and savored the soft feeling of her pajamas against her skin, which had been smoothened by the coarse sand rubbing against it all day. She took the time to write in her Word Book before passing out in her bed.

Seashell: Objects at the sea where little animals lived. They are not really seashells at the lake, but Max said it’s okay to call them that anyway.

The next time someone needed to use the van didn’t come for another week. “Hey! Who got so much sand in the car!” Flo called accusingly, and Hopper shrugged.

Notes for the Chapter:

Was Hopper reading a chick flick??? hmm??? Further evidence Hopper is a soap addict???? HMM?????

12. Divorce + Step-brother

Summary for the Chapter:

Several people wanted El to learn about divorce, so here it is! The word divorce was suggested by Maura and loki_mito, and synovelle suggested step-sibling. Thank you so much for the words!

Notes for the Chapter:

You may have noticed I'll be ending this fic at chapter 18. I've planned out all the chapter words until then, which means I'm no longer taking suggestions. But I think we've got a pretty good lineup ahead of us! I will be writing another Stranger Things fic after this, but it will be dark and very unlike this one, just so you know what's to come. It will have plot, unlike this poorly-strung collection of one-shots, so if you're into that, it's coming. Also, if you suggested a h e a v y word that has to do with El's past, you probably won't be seeing it in this fic, but it may be a theme explored in the next fic. So yeah! That's it. I'm done finals now and have fuckall to do on weekdays, so expect every-other-day or daily updates from now on.

xox

August 6, 1985

El knew there were two conditions to being allowed to open the cabin door.

1. The rap at the door needed to be consistent with the secret knock.
2. They needed to be expecting company.

If Hopper wasn't home, she was to send him the word "door" via

morse code. Then she was to hide in her room, ready to protect herself if ““God forbid, Hopper said’, need be. If he was home, El almost felt bad for whatever sorry sucker was on the other side of the wood.

This is why, at eleven o’clock at night, when El was shaken from the world of her novel, she did not rush to the door when she heard the secret knock. Hopper hadn’t mentioned anyone was coming, and the only times visitors ever came were when El specifically requested they come, so she would know.

But she had no idea who was there, or why they would be out and about so late.

El slowly slipped out from underneath her comforter and tip-toed to Hopper’s room, not wanting to give away her presence to their mystery guest. Hopper was fast asleep and snoring like an animal, exhausted from the day at the station where he was both training Steve and dealing with domestic disputes. El paid little mind of how dead he was to the world and shook him wildly.

“Hop!” she whisper-shouted. Hopper sat bolt up like a switch had been flicked, mumbling the remnants of whatever he was dreaming about.

“Wha-what? What is it? El, do you know what time it is?” he muttered, pissed to be woken up.

“There’s someone. At the door,” El explained, and that was enough to get Hopper immediately out of bed, also treading with light footsteps. He grabbed his gun, just in case, and made his way to the door while El watched from the threshold of his bedroom, knowing she wasn’t allowed to be up close but unwilling to be completely separated from the action.

Gun clutched tightly to his chest, Hopper took a deep breath before throwing open the door.

What was on their doorstep was not what El expected to see.

“Max?” she wondered aloud and made her way to the door.

Instead of a large, scary man or a government official out to find El, the sharp-tongued and witty red-head was standing at their front door. Her eyes were swollen, and she was shivering despite the August warmth.

Max didn't speak, but just looked from Hopper to El, and back to Hopper. There was an unspoken communication between the two, like Hopper had background knowledge to this situation.

"Aw geez, kid," he muttered as he ushered the girl inside and closed the door behind them.

"Are you hurt?" El asked, trying to make sense of the scene. Hopper and Max exchanged a glance as though they both knew something El didn't.

Max shook her head. "No, I'm fine. I just needed..." she trailed off, and Hopper nodded. Wordlessly, he turned on the main room's light for the girls and went to grab a spare blanket to set up on the couch. El still had no idea what was going on, and it made her feel helpless. Hopper motioned towards the makeshift bed and nodded at Max. "You can stay here tonight; it's already late. But we can't have your mom worrying about you, so if they call tonight, you answer and tell them you're coming home. And if they don't, you'll call in the morning anyway. Got it?"

Max nodded, the 'thank you' obvious in her expression but nonetheless exchanged wordlessly. "They aren't home, anyway," she added in a whisper, if only to give the Chief some piece of mind.

Hopper addressed El next. "You can stay up for another hour, but if you're tired tomorrow for Steve, you still gotta do your work anyway. No complaints." With that, he clambered back to his room and presumably to bed, where he would be out in another thirty seconds.

Max took a tentative seat on the couch, and El took the spot next to her. Max rubbed at an eye with a sour but pained expression and stared at the floor. "Sorry I woke you guys up," she mumbled in a way that made it sound like she was sorry for many more things than just waking El and Hopper up.

El shook her head. "You didn't wake me up." Max worried her bottom lip, apparently not soothed by that knowledge. "Are you...sad?" El guessed.

Max let out a small huff and rubbed at her face again. For a pregnant moment, neither girl said nothing, until Max finally breathed out, "Yeah."

El had never spent time alone with Max, and in this moment, she realized that really impacted how little she knew about her. She knew mundane things like how she liked video games and Star Wars. She also knew that she was smart and funny and had a jerky brother, and all her friends loved her. But that was pretty much where it ended.

So El had very little idea of how to comfort her friend, so she did the only thing that could come to mind and wrapped Max in a tight embrace. Max stiffened initially at the touch, her hands frozen in her lap, until she finally relaxed and hugged El back. The act of tenderness seemed to be all she needed for everything pent up inside her to come crashing down, and she started shaking with unavoidable sobs, sniffing every couple of seconds in an effort to avoid getting mucus on El's t-shirt.

El was startled by Max's reaction to the gesture, but stayed in place and let her cry it out against her shoulder. El wanted to say something to fix whatever was broken in Max, but she knew she wasn't good at healing through words like Mike or Dustin. So she just matched how tightly Max clung to her.

Eventually, Max pulled herself away and smudged the tear tracks on her cheeks with her sweatshirt sleeve. "Sorry," she whispered with a shake of her head.

"Don't be sorry," El assured. She tried to remember what her friends would say when she was sad. "Do...you want to talk about it?" she tried, remembering how Dustin always started with that question, to give her the option to say 'no' if she wasn't ready. Mike was more quick to try to get to the root of her problem, attempting to fix her with a favor that in and of itself always made El feel a little better. But with Max, she thought the former approach may be better.

Max shrugged and fiddled with her thumbs. El remained silent, so Max decided to speak. "I just..." she trailed off, staring up at the ceiling. "I just miss my dad," she stated in a rush, thick tears cascading down her cheeks.

El's eyebrows furrowed unintentionally. "Where is he?" she asked.

"Back in California," Max explained. "After the divorce, the court decided I had to stay with my mom, which is really fucking stupid because they didn't even give me a say. Not that I don't love my mom...I just miss my dad." She choked out the last part, fresh tears threatening to spill.

El felt bad for Max. She knew what it was like to miss someone, after all. She spent 353 days away from her friends, away from Mike. But she didn't at all understand the context of Max being away from her dad. She didn't want to ask for more information because she felt like now might really not be the time, but if she was going to help Max, she needed to understand a little more.

"What is...divorce?" El asked, hoping she pronounced the word correctly.

Max finally looked El in the eye, and her expression showed she was clearly not upset at El asking. "Divorce is when two parents don't want to be together anymore," she explained, expression somber but intense. "Divorce is when a mom and dad decide they don't want to live together, and their kids have to stay with only one of them at a time. Sometimes I get to see my dad, but not a lot because we moved so far away. That's why..." her voice trembled again. "That's why I'm here right now. I was supposed to see him this weekend, but mom just decided not to let me go. And then she went out with Neil for the night."

The sobs began again, and El's heart went out to the other girl. "Just fucking decided I didn't get to go anymore and then left the house. She said I had to stay because..." Max shook her head, trying to remember what was actually said through all the heavy emotions. "Something about how important it was that the whole family is around to see Billy off when he leaves for his job in Iowa. She said he needs his little sister here. But guess what? I'm not even his sister!"

she yells the last part and quickly sobers, glancing in the direction of Hopper's room.

El realizes this is the longest time she and Max have ever spoken. Max doesn't have any shortage of words and happily talks to Lucas and Dustin, and they have long conversations as a whole party. But just the two themselves have never talked for so long. She knew so little about the girl that she thought Billy was her brother, but apparently he's not?

El's face must have given away her confusion, and Max was quick to give an explanation, probably thankful to have something to do other than cry. "Billy is my mom's husband's, Neil's, son. He's not really my brother. He's just my step-brother. Step-siblings get along sometimes...but not Billy and I. He's a dick. I mean, I understand why he is, but he's still the worst." Max curled her knees up to her chest and looked smaller than El thought she was. "He's just...he's just a..."

"Mouthbreather?" El suggested, and the corner of Max's mouth turned up for the first time this evening.

"Yeah. A real mouthbreather," Max agreed and sighed. "I would have just snuck in Lucas' window, but you know he's visiting his grandma with his family." El did know. Lucas hadn't stopped talking about it for weeks. "I'm so sorry to drag this to you, El. You don't deserve any of this. You of all people." Max let out a humorless laugh. "You of all people should not have to listen to my shitty problems."

El shook her head vigorously. "No. I want to," El reassured her friend and placed her hand on top of Max's. And she meant it.

Max took another deep breath, her breathing less shaky and her shoulders starting to relax. "Divorce isn't always this bad. Sometimes it's just for the best, but it really sucked for my family. I really sucks a lot." The girls sat together in silence, and El hoped her hand on Max's might communicate through words she didn't have that despite their rocky start, she would do anything for her friend.

El had never seen Max so still. Both were unsure of what to say. What else could they say?

What was the next step in making someone feel better? Max “talked about it”, as her friends would say. And they hugged. What else?

An idea struck El. “Wait,” she instructed, and left the couch to make her way to the kitchen. Within just a couple of minutes, she had returned with two plates of Eggos, each topped with whipped cream and M&Ms. Max laughed initially at the sight, and El felt a pang of worry that she had done something wrong, that she had embarrassed herself. But Max just took the plate and fork and dug into the treat with a simple, “Actually, I really was hungry.” El beamed, glad she did something right.

The two ate wordlessly until their plates were empty and El deposited them into the dishwasher. Max had cocooned herself in the blanket Hopper brought out, and was lying down with her head on the armrest and her face towards the couch backing.

El took this as her hint to leave, and started towards her bedroom, when she heard a small, “El?” She turned around. Max still wasn’t looking at her, but she was clearly talking to her. “Thanks.”

El nodded, although she knew Max couldn’t see. “Thank you,” she replied, and Max was left wondering what she was thanking her for as El flicked off the light and retreated to her room.

Max fell asleep first, having exhausted herself from the journey to the cabin along with the emotional distress and crying. El couldn’t sleep for a while, so she busied herself in her Word Book instead.

Divorce: When a mama and dad are not together anymore. Max says it is not always sad but it makes Max sad.

Step-brother: A brother that’s not really your brother. (El ran a hand through her curls as she tried to find the right words to make sense of Max’s explanation.) I think they can be like a brother but sometimes you do not love them like you love a brother.

El drifted off with her lamp still on and the Word Book still beside

her.

In the next room, Hopper replays the conversation he just heard. He thinks of his ex-wife. He thinks of Sara. He thinks of El: the only good thing to come out of that mess. He doesn't sleep that night.

Notes for the Chapter:

Bah, sorry for the less-happy-than-usual ending! That's the only one of those in this fic that you'll get. I just didn't feel like, given the situation, there could really have been an immediate happy ending for this scenario. Moreso just a way to ease the hurt a bit. Additionally, you might have noticed some heteronormative language in this chapter, and that's because this was the 80's. Please don't take it as a reflection as what I think of marriage (because honey I'm queer af), but instead just as what Max's understanding of marriage is. Lastly, if you're not satisfied with the definition of step-brother, that's fine because remember that El's knowledge of limited only to the conversation she just had and what she knows of the relationship between Max and Billy. It's supposed to not be very thorough. Thanks for reading!

xox

13. Tickle

Summary for the Chapter:

Word suggested by Toongrrrl1990. Thank you so much! :D

Notes for the Chapter:

I love my babies they are good and pure and deserve to laugh.

xox

August 19, 1985

The party mourned the incoming loss of their summertime freedom by spending as much time together as possible. School started in just one day, and they knew the chaos of academics would soon catch up to them, preventing their union, especially with El. The boys and Max would start high school and be occupied with adjusting to a new building and atmosphere, as well as learning to cope with more responsibilities and curriculum.

As for El, Steve had reminded her last Friday that when her friends went back to school, they would buckle down more heavily. And as excited she was to expand her knowledge, she wished she could do it with her friends by her side.

Hopper was taking a nap in his bedroom in an effort to give El more time alone with her friends, and to show her that he trusted her. El loved the feeling of independence it gave her, accompanied by the security of knowing Hop was just one room over if she needed him.

Ghostbusters had just finished playing on the small television screen, and the party could not decide what to watch next.

From his position wedged between Will and Dustin on the couch, Lucas drew out a long sigh and craned his head back onto the cushions. "Guys, can you believe that in just a couple of days, we're

going to have homework?

Max, coozied on the floor in between Lucas' left leg and Will's right, groaned at the prospect. "Do we have to talk about it? Can't we just pretend we get to live like this forever?"

El propped her head up on one arm from her place splayed out on the floor, and Mike shifted his head from her stomach to the hardwood at the uncomfortable angle. "I have homework now," El pointed out.

Dustin laughed, and Will snorted snarkily and nudged Lucas in the side. "Yeah, Lucas. El's had homework for months. Quit complaining."

Lucas rolled his eyes while Mike sat up from his place on the floor. El rolled herself onto her stomach to stare at her friends. Lucas raised a hand guardingly. "Hey," he defended himself, "I was just pointing out what we were all thinking."

Maybe out of boredom or simply to tease him, Dustin laughed again and shook his head, "You don't know what we were thinking," he retorted and poked Lucas in the ribs.

El watched in fascination as despite only being touched lightly, Lucas shrunk away from Dustin's finger and squished himself into Will. He and Dustin stared at each other for a long moment, during which Lucas lowered his gaze in a way El had come to know meant, "*Do not do whatever you're thinking of doing*."

To test Lucas' boundaries, Dustin once again darted out a finger and poked Lucas in the side. In response, Lucas hopped off the couch and sat next to El, a twinge of a grin threatening to spill onto his cheeks. "El, can you please use your powers to make Dustin fuck off?" he sweetly asked, and El rose her eyebrows in confusion while Mike chuckled beside her.

"He doesn't mean it," Mike whispered to her, and El nodded, glad to hear a confirmation for what she was already almost 99% sure of.

Max's face twisted into a smize, and she placed a hand over her heart. "Hang on," she crooned, theatrically batting her eyelashes.

“Dustin,” she asked, despite still looking at Lucas, “Are you telling me Lucas is *ticklish* ?

Lucas pretended to gag on air. “Please don’t use the word ‘tickle’. It’s gross,” he emphasized. “And no, I’m not ticklish,” he claimed, despite folding his arms to guard his abdomen.

Mike was chuckling feverishly by now. “I don’t know about that,” he teased. “I think someone’s just afraid of what’s going to happen when they get tickled.”

El had absolutely no idea what the group was talking about, but she caught Will’s twinkling eye and watched as he slowly rose from the couch. Lucas was still facing Mike and El, his back turned to Will. El saw Will raise a finger to his lips in a gesture El had learned meant, “Shh.”

So she distracted Lucas in the only way that could come to mind. “What is tickle?” El asked Lucas, looking him in the eye to hopefully keep him distracted from the approaching antics behind him.

Lucas sighed and smeared a hand over each eye, and despite the exasperated gesture, it was apparent to El he was trying desperately to hide the tendrils of a grin creeping up the sides of his mouth. “Don’t worry about it, El. They’re just being ridiculous-”

Lucas’ attempt to deflect El’s question was interrupted when Will took hold of Lucas on either side of him between the end of his ribs and his hipbones and began to wiggle his fingers. Lucas choked out a laugh and tried to squirm away, but Max and Dustin were on him before he could escape. El watched in fascination at how Lucas was laughing while trying to squirm away at the same time. She worried he was in pain at how desperately he was trying to escape, but was confused at his efforts being accompanied by laughter.

El grabbed Mike by the forearm and shot him an alarmed glance, not sure what was going on and if Lucas was okay. In an effort to soothe her, Mike gave El a sympathetic smile and took her by the hand. “Guys,” he addressed his friends. Everyone looked up at Mike, not completely ceasing the tickling but slowing enough to divert some attention to Mike.

“Lucas, they’ll stop tickling if you want them to stop. You just have to say stop,” Mike explained, and El waited to see what Lucas would do in response.

The room fell into silence, each of the teens waiting for Lucas to react to what Mike said. Just as El’s anxiety was about to push her into asking Mike to repeat the question, Lucas shot up from the floor and pounced on Dustin. “Oh, you are so dead, Henderson,” he taunted and began to serve Dustin a taste of his own medicine.

Mike shook his head in a way El sometimes saw Steve do when she did something funny. He mumbled in wonder, “How did this even...El!” His musings were cut off when El took her hands to Mike’s ribs and tried to copy the funny finger-wiggles her friends were doing. His legs thrashed wildly at first and broke into a fit of laughter himself, pushing at El to get away just enough to be able to claim he resisted, but definitely not enough to actually push her off.

Will caught sight of El’s relentless tickling and sat up to point and yell, “Everyone get Mike!”

Over the course of several minutes, El came to the firm conclusion that she really liked tickles. It was another way of nice touches with people she trusted, like holding hands or hugging. And it even made itself into a game. She couldn’t help giggling until her eyes brimmed with tears, and El paid slight attention to the fleeting thought that this was the first time she ever laughed and cried at the same time.

Eventually, the group found themselves generally sprawled about in a heap. Exhausted from the “fight”, El took hold of the hands of Mike, who loomed over her with the residual chuckle escaping his lips. She couldn’t help but crane her neck up and press her lips to his for a fleeting moment until Mike pulled one hand from El and poked her in the side, sending her into another fit of giggles.

As soon as El’s friends left when Joyce came to pick them up, El rushed to her room and pulled out her word book.

Tickle: A way to move your fingers to make someone laugh. It

can be a game. It is fun.

“Kid? Where are you? I just got up!” she heard Hopper call accompanied by the sound of large feet padding through the kitchen. El closed her binder and left out of the room.

“Hey, El. Did you have fun with your friends toda-” El interrupted Hopper’s line of questioning with a poke in the ribs, and Hopper jumped back and put his hands up as if to surrender.

“Today I learned what tickle is,” El explained, and proceeded to chase Hopper around the cabin.

Notes for the Chapter:

Why can't I shake the feeling this is ooc ugh UGH I
tried okay bYe
xox

14. Gay

Summary for the Chapter:

#Doublepost !! I can't sleep, so here we at.
Many thanks to KawaiiKitsune13 for suggesting El learn about why Troy bullies Will. I didn't know I needed to write this, but turns out I really, really did.
xox

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter will be tackling homophobia and elements of PTSD. For this chapter, I will be drawing from my own experiences of PTSD and its symptoms. They may not reflect how others experience PTSD.
TW for non-graphic flashbacks and slurs.

September 1, 1985

Not that El thought he had been, but Steve really hadn't been kidding when he said they were going to pick up speed in her schoolwork once the official school year began. She was currently doing homework for geometry, which she oddly didn't hate, despite her distaste for math overall. Although math had a certain stability to it that the other subjects didn't have, El loved the free-flowing nature of words, and not the ones she got in mathematics' word problems. But geometry made more sense than pre-algebra: it was visual and had an element of contiguity that made it more tolerable.

El sat her pencil down at her desk and sighed at her planner. Steve helped her schedule when she needed to have each bit of work done by, in order to keep up with the rest of the material she needed to learn to join the boys during sophomore year. She did love the swell of pride she felt every time she crossed off something she accomplished, but she couldn't help but resist slightly at being told what she needed to do and when she needed to do it. El wanted to engross herself in literature, read through her history textbooks, and

occasionally learn the wonders of biology. Sometimes, she had half a mind to disregard Steve's instructions.

But when she felt herself sliding from the tracks, she remembered why she wanted to do so much schoolwork in such a short span of time in the first place: to be with her friends, to prove to herself that she could achieve her goals, and to live a (more) normal life.

El sat her head in her hand and drifted into daydreams of life as a student at Hawkins High. She would eat lunch with her friends every day. She would roam freely among the shelves and shelves of stories in the school library. She would hold hands with Mike in the hallways. El could practically see his blush now.

She was just so bored. Triangles were better than complicated riddles of x's and y's, but her brain felt fried, it was already ten o'clock, and her eyes strained to focus in the dim light of her desk lamp.

"It is only Monday," El thought. She had all of tomorrow to complete the rest of her worksheets and readings before Steve came back Wednesday morning. Sure, the planner had her geometry worksheets scheduled for tonight and not tomorrow, but it was just getting so hard to pay attention...

El needed motivation. And she wasn't finding it alone at her desk.

She turned in her chair and gave the blindfold flung onto her headboard a sidelong glance before darting over to put it on before she could second-guess herself. El knotted the fabric behind her head and focused.

No one in the party could deny that she and Will had developed an unmistakably strong bond. Both plagued by horrors of the past, as well as owning newfound shared appreciations for the little things in life brought them close in such a special way. At times, El swore to herself she could feel Will's emotions, and the connection between them seemed even stronger at the fact that Will always knew when El was about to visit. This was why El only did impromptu visits for Will: she knew he could sense her about to come, and thus she never had to worry about interrupting anything. Will always put aside whatever he was doing to prepare himself for quality chats with his

newest friend.

El blinked once beneath the blindfold and found herself enveloped in blackness. She blinked once more and found herself at the side of Will's bed, small details of his room scattered about in the emptiness, giving it a more homey effect. But one thing was missing: Will.

El's first instinct was to panic. Why had she felt that Will was in his bedroom, but he wasn't here?

"Will?" she asked the nothingness. No response. "Will?" she called, louder this time, fear causing bile to begin its rise up her throat. Silence. She spun around and screamed out one more time. "Will!"

Just then, El noticed a small sound emerge from somewhere in the empty. Not a word, but just a sound. When El tried to determine which direction it had come from, she heard it once more, definitely from somewhere in the visible skeleton of Will's room.

Wordlessly, El crept from the side of the bed to the foot. Nothing was there. The noise was once more emitted, and this time, El knew what it was: a snuffle.

She made her way around to the other side of the bed to find Will with his head between his folded knees, back to the side of the bed, hands grabbing in his hair.

"Will!" El exclaimed in relief at finding her friend, but as soon as she knelt beside him, she recognized that something was very, very wrong.

Will jumped at her sudden presence beside him, head popping out from its hiding place and wide, bloodshot eyes scanning their surroundings. El realized he had been crying, and furthermore, he didn't appear to have been expecting her.

El had an idea of what was going through Will's mind at this moment. Sometimes, she was so afraid frustrated that she couldn't speak, but could only cling to the tangible elements around her and wait for calm to return to her. So El didn't try to speak to Will, but instead took his hand and guided him up onto his bed, trying to

mimic what Hop did for her when she got like this. She tucked her friend under his covers and squeezed his hand equally as hard as he squeezed hers.

Will wasn't crying, likely having stopped soon before El arrived. But his body shook silently with dry sobs, and El couldn't shake the feeling he might curl into himself and disappear. It made something in her chest ache.

Eventually, Will stopped shuddering and loosened his grip on El, but then buried his face into his pillow and groaned. "Sorry," he murmured against the fabric. "Sorry, sorry, sorry," Will chanted, and El couldn't figure out why he would be apologizing.

The pair sat in silence for a long moment, letting their lungs regain adequate amounts of oxygen and giving time for Will's breathing to even out. El wished she could be more useful, but knew all she could do for comfort was simply be by her friend's side.

Will turned to his side to face El, who was seated cross-legged at the other edge of the bed, watching her friend come back to himself. He had yet to open his eyes, and El noticed the blanket rise and fall in a rhythm so slow, she thought he might have fallen asleep. But she stayed, just in case she was wrong.

"It doesn't make any sense," Will stated and opened his eyes, startling El. "I thought 'zombie boy' was bad, but turns out it might not be as bad as 'fairy'. I guess I had just forgotten how bad it hurt." Silence fell over them again.

Fairy? El knew all about fairies. In the fantasy books she read, fairies were beautiful and special, with wings to fly and magic to work miracles. Why would Will not want to be a fairy?

"I...like fairies," El said truthfully, in an attempt to comfort her friend. Will shook his head, and El realized she definitely did not understand what was going on.

"That's nice, El," Will reassured. "But that's not what Troy and his gang mean. When they say fairy, they mean 'gay'. They're saying I'm gay," Will explained and proceeded to hide his face in his pillow

again.

Alarmed at Will appearing to regress, El tried to think of what to do to fix her friend. "Troy is a mouthbreather," she reminded Will, who chuckled softly against his pillow and cautiously peered back out at El.

"Yeah, he is. And I know that...Everyone knows that." Will sighed. "But it still hurts. Fairy, fag, all that stuff." A fresh tear escaped a glassy eye, and Will whisked it away. "Like, is it that obvious? Am I that fucking gay?" he spit out with venom.

El was taken aback at the cuss word that spilled from her friend. This was the first time El ever heard Will say a swear.

She didn't think anything about Will was obvious, other than that he was kind, nice, and smart. But not...gay, whatever that was.

El didn't want to ask what the word meant, as the way Will spoke of it made her think it was a not-nice word. Whatever the word meant, it hurt Will enough to put him in a bad place. Just the thought of someone hurting her friend made her blood boil in every vein. If she ever saw Troy again, she'd-

"Woah, El. Calm down," Will soothed. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to upset you. I didn't know you were coming," he admitted, and El thought that fact was all the more reason to be upset.

The two stared at each other for a second, and El wondered if Will was still enough in touch to realize what her unspoken question was. "I know there are other gay people," Will whispered. "Other boys who like boys. Girls who like girls. You know, the way you and Mike like each other. Or the way Max and Lucas like each other. But boys aren't supposed to like boys," Will explained in his hushed tone.

El had never before thought of the fact that her being a girl and Mike being a boy meant anything. Or that Lucas being a boy and Max being a girl meant anything. If Will, a boy, liked another boy, why would that be any different?

"I tried to pretend I liked girls," Will continued. "I danced with Cindy

at the Snowball. She was really nice and all, I guess. I just..." he trailed off. "I could never like a girl the way Lucas, Dustin, and Mike like girls. I-" Will heaved a breath of air. "Like boys that way."

El tried to piece together this new concept. "That means..." she theorized, "That means you are gay?" El asked. Will nodded and surprised El by sputtering out a laugh.

"Yeah, it does. It means I'm gay. Wow, yeah. It means I'm gay," he whispered, as though he was surprised at his own words. He met El's eyes, and she knew what he was about to say was serious. "I've never told anyone that. Sometimes I think people know, but they've never asked, and I've never told. It would be bad if some people knew. Some people," Will gulped, "Some people don't like gay people."

El scrunched up her eyebrows. That seemed ridiculous. "You are gay. You are Will. I like you," she decided, and Will smiled.

"Thanks, El. That means a lot," Will said gratefully. "Just...don't tell the others, yet. That I'm gay."

El frowned. "Why?"

Will sighed again. "I'm just...not ready. It's...hard, El. When I admit it to myself, I think of the upside-down, which doesn't make a lot of sense. But when I was there, I kept thinking the same thing over and over again." Will choked, and El realized he must be trying to hold back tears again. "I just kept thinking to myself that I was going...to die...I was going to die, and no one was ever going to know...the truth. I was going to die alone, a fag, and I would have never told anyone. How shitty is that? How cowardly is that?" Tears were rolling down Will's cheeks by now, and El took his hand again in an attempt to reassure her friend.

"I won't tell," El promised. If it was this important to Will, she wouldn't tell a single person. She squeezed her friend's hand. "But friend's don't lie," she reminded him.

Will nodded. "I know. I know, El. And I'll tell them, I promise. But for a lot of reasons, it's hard, and it might take a while."

El pulled Will into a hug and smoothed his hair out where he had messed it up in his turmoil. Eventually, Will returned to the comfort zone underneath his blankets.

“Thank you, El.”

“Good night, Will.”

El stayed until she was sure her friend was asleep, and only then did she allow herself to be pulled back to her desk at the cabin. Her nose was bleeding out of both nostrils, but El took the time to write in her Word Book before cleaning herself up.

Gay: A boy who likes boys or a girl who likes girls. It seems hard to be gay. But people who think it is bad are mouthbreathers.

The next morning, El finished her geometry work.

On the other side of town, Will walked into Hawkins High with his head up, surrounded by his friends, ignoring Troy's taunts. Sharing his secret had lifted a weight from his shoulders, and with the feeling of being lighter came newfound courage.

Notes for the Chapter:

If you need a good laugh after any feelings this chapter might have dredged up, I found this video in my Youtube recommendations earlier today and it had me rolling so I thought I'd share (I don't own it, of course). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNTlspEOV8g>

Thanks for reading! Every chapter proceeding this will be fluffy fluff, once again.

xox

15. Flirting

Summary for the Chapter:

Many thanks to topangamatthews for suggesting this chapter's word! This is partially from Mike's POV because i t w a s f u n.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey there. I'm truly so sorry. Been some time. Sorry for such a long gap - this was definitely not a 1-3 day break between updates. Shit's been gross at home, and it was hard to a) find time to write and b) write cute stuff. So this took a long time and the tone might be off, but I promise I really tried.

Enjoy.

I'll be back to my regular ol 1-3 days between updates now!

xox

September 30, 1985

It started off innocently enough.

El had fallen for the way Mike's cheeks flushed when she gave him a compliment, and the way he held her tightly when she looked at him a certain way. Everyone in the party knew she had the boy wrapped around her little finger, and while El never meant to flaunt the privilege, she loved to remind herself of its presence.

"You have pretty eyelashes," El announced one day at the arcade. It was Mike's turn up at the console, and when he heard the compliment, he blushed and sputtered, losing his concentration and therefore the game. El felt a little bad about that last bit, but just a little. She justified the outburst because she had spent the entire duration of Mike's game of pong staring at the intensity and focus in his gaze, and it was hard not to notice every one of the long strands

of obsidian guarding El's favorite person's eyes. They looked even better framed by a flushed, pink background.

El took notice.

After the afternoon at the arcade, when Jonathan drove the party to the cabin and El found herself pressed between the window and Mike's gangly form, she knocked her knee against his and whispered, "I like that you are warm." Mike grew hotter and El cozied herself up into her favorite person's side, the others in the car all exchanging exasperated glances.

El didn't let up. Mike's laugh. Mike's arms. Mike's walk. Mike's deepening voice, in all its cracking glory. El adored it all, and she let Mike know.

The following weekend, everyone was settled in the Byers' living room for a sleepover. The sun had set hours ago, and the only light in the room came from the television, the cast of *Cheer's* going on about *who cares* in the background. Mike and El had claimed the couch, Will was cozied up in an armchair, and the Dustin, Max, and Lucas dozed in their sleeping bags on the floor, Chester lying peacefully between Lucas and Max.

Mike was, as usual, the last to fall asleep. Lucas always complained of being the first to wake, having to wait around for everyone else to rise in the mornings. But Mike didn't particularly like being the last to fall asleep, either. He knew he should be sleeping, judging by the conked-out faces of his friends. El slumped against him in a way Mike knew would give her a crick in the neck by morning, lips slightly parted, body rising and falling gently. It almost made being awake bearable.

Cheers was still playing in the background, and Mike was debating whether he should lay El down and turn it off, or if he should stay as still as possible, when he startled at a sudden voice.

"Mike?" El murmured, snuggling closer to him and taking his hand, weaving her smaller fingers between his comparably giant ones.

"Was she awake all this time?" Mike wondered, letting his hand be

manipulated by El. “Yeah, El?” he whispered back, expecting one of many possible answers. “This show is boring,” “I want to sleep,” and just a simple, “Hi,” all being one he considered.

Nope. “I like your hands,” El stated instead. His hands? Through the darkness, Mike couldn’t easily see their hands pressed together, but he felt her digits between his, holding firmly, decidedly stating that they belonged to each other.

Mike rubbed his thumb against the bottom knuckle of El’s own and hummed in contentment at the domesticity of the night. He liked El’s hands too. They were soft and warm and clung to him as though El saw him as some better version of himself. It made him want to be better for her.

And her hands were powerful. They held pencils and highlighters and diligently completed all the work Steve assigned so that El can join Hawkins High for sophomore year. Her hands played with the budding curls of his hair, and they held Mike’s face firmly to give him eskimo kisses.

Moreover, her hands showed her strength. El crawled on her hands and knees out of Hawkins laboratory, away from all she had ever known and towards an uncertain and potentially dangerous future. Her hands had reached out, alight with tendrils of her powers, to keep him and their friends safe, to destroy the demogorgon and close the gate.

And her hands held his.

Mike thought they must be the most important hands in the world.

Chest burning with some semblance of euphoria, he fumbled for her other hand in the darkness, and when he found it, he locked him together with her and kissed her on the nose. Well, he mostly missed and kissed the spot under her eye, but El still giggled with delight.

Lit up with the joy El radiated, Mike gently guided El to rest her back down on the couch and dipped his face until he was just inches from hers. With her head laid on the armrest, the light from the television the high points of her face just enough for Mike to make out some of

her delicate features and her blown-out pupils. Mike couldn't help but break one of his hands away from hers to cup her cheek.

His breath shuddered as he felt a small huff escape El's lips and land on his cupid's bow. "El," he exhaled, and kissed her deeply.

Their rhythm wasn't in sync, and Mike has no idea what to do with his tongue because it *was* the first time they kissed like this, but they would have many chances to figure it out.

El broke away first, gasping slightly but urgent with the words dancing on the tip of her tongue. "Mike," she whispered. "I like your—"

"El, oh my God." Mike lowered his mouth to leave a gentle kiss on his favorite person's forehead. "El," he chuckled against the skin. "You are over the top with the flirting, lately," Mike decided, and El smiled. If she got to be kissed like this, she thought she might want to keep it up.

Mike placed a chase kiss on El again, this time against her lips. "But two can play at that game," Mike grinned cheekily and reached up to hold El's face in both of his hands.

"I like your laugh. It's the most beautiful laugh I've ever heard. God, look what you've done to me," he laughed, shaking his head lightly. "You've turned me into such a cheeseball. But I can't help it."

He ran a finger over El's eyebrow and went to meet her gaze. Their faces were so close that he had to flicker his focus between both the eyes. El was doing the same, something resting in her irises that Mike couldn't place but had a feeling he also displayed. "I like your eyes. I like the way...the way they look at me," Mike stumbled out.

He tangled his digits in the mop of curls behind El's head. "I like your hair. When you didn't have hair, I thought you were so pretty with or without the wig. But your hair is even better than the wig, times a million. It smells good, and I like to touch it." El let out a giggle at the confession.

Mike let himself spill out the rest of his thoughts, hoping he could

make up for all the flirting El had done recently. He left gentle caresses, words of tenderness, and he left it all in some disjointed poem with teenage nerves and memories of nights without her nestled in its margins.

At some point, El had flicked her head to turn off the television without either of them needing to get up, and had pulled him down at the waist to lie next to her. They fell asleep with breath mingling and something heavy with youth and sincerity in the air between them.

Flirting: Saying or touching in a way that makes the person you like get a pink face.

16. Virus

Summary for the Chapter:

This chapter's word was suggested by notlikeshedid and Meg (anon). I thought it would work for some good ol' fashioned El & Hop bonding fluff.

Notes for the Chapter:

I wrote the second half of this while trashed. But I tried really hard to still be very careful with my writing. :))))))))))

October 21, 1985

Lucas came down with it first. The October day was unusually warm, so the party flocked to the woods directly outside the cabin to savor what time outside they had left before winter. Dustin peeled off his sweatshirt, and El kicked off her shoes.

It was during an intense conversation about how Dustin, Will's, and Max's science teacher strongly resembled the Lorax from Dr. Seuss that El noticed Lucas shaking at her side.

El nudged him with her elbow and gave him a concerned glance, to which Lucas swallowed and tried to stop shivering. "Dustin?" he asked instead. "If you're not gonna wear that sweatshirt, can I borrow it?"

"Cuuuuute," Max cooed mockingly, but Mike's brows furrowed.

"You're really cold right now?" he asked disbelievingly.

Will nodded. "Yeah, and you've already got one sweatshirt on, too. Are you feeling okay?" Lucas reddened under his friends increasing concern, and shook his head.

"Nah, guys. I've just got a chill," he insisted, and right on cue,

sneezed into his sleeve.

El retrieved one of Hopper's spare sweatshirts from inside the cabin for her friend.

Steve came over the next day for tutoring, but his hair was mussed slightly, and the base of his nose was swollen red.

"It's just a virus," Steve consoled her. "It's what makes you sick. It's really not that bad," he said, but cocooned himself in blankets for the majority of the day and didn't touch his food when the pair broke for lunch. It made El worry all day.

The following morning, El knew something was wrong before she even opened her eyes. Despite being huddled under more than just a few layers of blankets, she shivered from her head to her toes. Her eyelashes felt glued together, and when El wiped at them, she discovered more gunk than she ever had in the morning, even compared to the times she had cried herself to sleep. And to top it all off, dull ache throbbed diligently behind her eyes.

When she slipped out of bed in search of Hop, who was sure to have answers, the cozy cabin air seemed to bite at her skin. El shuddered at the nip, decidedly wrapping a blanket around her like a cloak.

When she trudged out of her bedroom, Hopper was at the coffee pot, pouring himself a steaming mug. He noticed her deep frown all the way to her forehead, and how her body seemed to curl in on itself. El made her way across the kitchen. "Aw, kid, what happened?" Hopper muttered, opening his arms when he saw El drop her blanket and reach out an arm, assuming he was in for a hug. But instead, El took the mug from him, downed a big sip, and promptly spit it into the sink at the bitter taste.

Hopper gawked at El, who picked up her blanket again and this time did smash herself up against Hop, looking for a hug. "Cold. Very cold," El tried to explain, and Hopper hummed out a concern, placing

the back of his hand against her forehead. When he pulled it away, El tried to bury herself in the crook of his arm, and it made Hopper's heart melt.

"Aw, El. I think you caught that virus going around," he tutted, and squeezed the girl tightly. "I'll get you something else warm to drink that doesn't taste like shit," he assured, and El giggled softly, despite that she felt like she wanted to crawl out of her aching skin. She sneezed into Hopper's uniform, murmuring a string of apologies as Hopper soothed her.

El was tucked back into bed along with any additional blanket Hopper could find around the house. They didn't have any tissues in the cabin, so he brought El a roll of toilet paper. "If you need to blow your nose," he explained. "This roll isn't for going to the bathroom with," he made sure to state, before dipping out of her room again.

Every limb of El's body felt heavier than it really was, and she wanted sleep to overtake her so she didn't have to feel so uncomfortable, but she couldn't settle down enough to drift off.

Hopper soon returned with a bowl of chicken noodle soup and a glass of water, and set both down on El's side table. El learned the soup would help warm her up, and the water would help her get better faster.

"Now, you've got a choice, kid," Hop told her firmly. "I know you feel like crap, so I can give you something that's going to make you feel better for a little bit. It's called Aspirin. But you might get better for good a little quicker if you don't take it. So what's it gonna be?" Hopper asked. El shook her head, wishing she hadn't because it felt as though her brain was bouncing around in her skull. "No Aspirin," El decided, and Hopper nodded. This was when she noticed Hopper had switched out his uniform for weekend clothes.

"You...you have to go to work," El mumbled as her head swam and her throat stung with every word. Hopper listened to her croaking and settled the bowl of soup on her lap.

"Not when you're sick," Hopper explained. "I'm going to stay right here and take care of you."

El whined out a protest, although truthfully, she would give anything to have Hop stay and take care of her. “No,” she tried reasoning. “You have to make...make money,” she remembered. Money paid for blankets and soup and pretty overalls and dresses.

Hopper chuckled. “It’ll be fine if I miss a few days,” Hopper replied, and El’s eyebrows shot up.

“A *few* days?” El asked incredulously, and also a bit too forcefully for her throat to handle. Hopper sighed.

“Yeah, sorry kid. Viruses usually take at least a few days for your body to fight up. Are you sure you don’t want the aspirin?” El shook her head ‘no’ again, and Hopper complied, instead reminding her to sip her water.

“Have you and your friends ever played crazy eight’s?” Hopper asked, and El made an unintelligible noise that Hopper took as “no”.

Hopper smiled despite himself at the domesticity of the morning. He was taking care of his sick child, something he never thought he’d be able to do again. “Let me get the deck, and I’ll come teach you.”

El finished two bowls of soup and four glasses of water before the sun went down and Hopper insisted she try to sleep again. It was the most restless sleep of her night, filled with freakishly vivid dreams of Mike and her friends, Steve, and Hopper. They were more intense than any dreams she had ever lived through of her Papa.

For the next few days, El allowed herself to be babied, something she usually didn’t enjoy but was appreciative now.

During a game of Go Fish, El gradually peeled off each layer of blankets until she was just under the sheets. Hopper stayed silent until El squirmed in discomfort so greatly that Hopper decided he needed to let her know her fever was probably breaking, but he didn’t want to get her hopes up.

Within five minutes of feeling the warmest and calmest El had been in days, she was asleep for another night.

When she awoke, Hopper was no longer by her side, and tendrils of

morning light spilled onto her bedsheets, which were kicked off her body and completely soaked with sweat. El sighed in contentment, disbelieving that she had so suddenly gone back to feeling like herself.

Immersed in her joy for beating the virus, El leapt out of her bed.

“Hop!” she called, her throat still slightly tender but still much stronger. “Hop, you can go back to work today!”

When she was met with silence, she lowered her voice and crept to Hop’s room. She glanced at the clock, which read 8:48. He’d be late soon if El didn’t wake him up.

“Hop!” she whisper-shouted as she pulled open his door tentatively. “Hop, I’m all better. You can go to work and make money-”

El stopped abruptly at the sight of Hop shivering deeply, cocooned in just one blanket. “*Viruses are contagious,*” Hopper had explained yesterday. “*You can’t have Mike over because he might get sick,*” he had said, and that reasoning had been enough for El. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel like she did.

She had neglected to think about how she could give Hop the virus.

El jumped into action immediately, bursting into her room, gathering up as many blankets as she could hold, and dumping them on top of Hopper.

“Would you like Aspirin?” she whispered, and Hopper smiled weakly, something reassembling pride nestling in the gaps between his ribs.

Virus: a sick you can give to other people. It makes you feel bad. You get better again after a few days.

Notes for the Chapter:

The whole time I was writing this I was #triggered remembering about how in S2 they say a virus is alive and I just

Also I'm still drunk.

xox

17. Adoption

Summary for the Chapter:

Chapter word owed to the lovely elandhop. Thanks a bundle for the suggestion!

Notes for the Chapter:

Ha hi sorry I'm late again blame this: <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13413981>

November 15, 1985

“Do you ever go and visit her?” Max whispered to her friend as the two girls lied next beside each other on the cabin’s hardwood, uncapping nail polish bottles strewn across the table beside them. El had no need to ask Max to specify who the pronoun referred to; they both knew.

She looked at the static blue eyes beside her and shook her head. Max gave a slight nod of understanding, not sure when what was supposed to be a lighthearted night had gotten so heavy.

The pair was having what Hopper called a “girl’s night”, although both of them knew that Max was no expert in what was feminine. But everyone likes brightly colored nails, and everyone likes the feeling of their hair being braided by someone else.

El’s eyes wandered to the messy series of braids she put in Max’s hair. She had been flustered and embarrassed when she couldn’t get the hang of it, but Max insisted that she liked them anyway. El sported her own short set of twin dutch braids, put there by Max’s much more experienced hands. She sighed and closed her eyes again, both girls close to falling asleep nestled on the cold ground. “I wanted to,” El explained, and let a pause hang before elaborating. “But she got sicker. Doesn’t know me,” El said. It was true; even when she visited her mother in the in-between, she was too far gone to recognize her surroundings. Sometimes El wondered if she owed Terry something; the woman had carried and birthed and fought for her. But when El

had put together those missing pieces of her life, although it was intriguing at first, she mostly just wanted to leave it behind now.

Max huffed, and the two girls let the air around them hang still with the memories of each of their broken homes. Broken very differently, possibly not even comparable, but still relatable just the same. How did the evening even get like this?

“Do you ever wonder about having a dad?” Max couldn’t help but press further, and El knew it was only because her friend was flooded with the thoughts of missing her own father.

El nodded. “Yes.” But not in the way Max thought.

The sound of El’s stomach growling stirred both girls from the somber haze, and the sudden disruption soon had them laughing despite themselves. They spent the rest of the evening (and well into the night) going through bags of chips and watching VHS copies of Hop’s favorite soaps.

And when she dreamed, she dreamed of her dad.

Over the next week, when El wasn’t immersed in Steve’s diligent tutoring, she had her nose in a Nancy Drew book for her book-of-choice report. And her choice in literature didn’t help her constant thoughts of a father figure. She rewrote her report more than once.

Nancy Drew’s mother died, so she was raised by her father. Nancy saves her father many times, and he is always proud of her. Carson Drew always wants Nancy to be independent and - El paused to look up a word in the dictionary, to make sure she was using it in the correct context - self-reliant. Carson and Nancy have an ideal relationship. His career and Nancy’s intelligence strengthen their bond.

Fathers are proud of their daughters. Fathers want their daughters to do well in life. Fathers take care of their daughters, and daughters take care of their fathers.

“This is one of your best reports so far, El,” Steve praised. “You’ve really expand your vocabulary, and it really sounds like you

connected with the characters.”

Steve was right.

“Your coat!” El called the next morning as Hopper hurriedly stumbled around the cabin, and she silently asked herself when she became the one worried about the other being warm.

“I can’t find it!” a gruff voice called back from the other side of the living room, and with a flick of her chin, El sent it flying into his face off of its place draped over the couch.

Hopper huffed in amusement and tugged it on while trying not to drop any of his things at the same time. “Steve will be here in fifteen minutes; get yourself out of your PJs. And brush your teeth when you’re done eating!” Hopper warned, earning an eye-roll in reply.

The chief swung open the front door and called out a goodbye. El barely looked up from her place at the kitchen table, hunched over her cheerios, and casually shouted out, “Bye, Dad!”

The door closed before either realized what just happened.

Oh.

Oh no.

El stared blankly at her cereal, cheeks burning, wondering about the implications of what she had just done.

On the front step, Hopper stared at the door with his heart in his throat, wondering if he should open it and say something or just let El be.

He let her be.

El had neither changed into “real clothes” or brushed her teeth by the time Steve arrived for her lessons.

And her cheerios got soggy.

"El, really, it's not a big deal," Steve tried to console her as she paced the floor, continuously spinning a pen in front of her while her hands crossed over her chest.

"Stop talking," El responded indignantly, even though she knew that her request didn't really make sense; she had been the one to bring the awkward morning up to Steve.

Eventually, El plopped herself back down at her seat at the table, her pieces of cereal no longer even resembling little o's. "It is a big deal," she eventually whispered. "What if-" she was forced to stop, something clogging up her throat. "What if he doesn't want to be my dad?" she choked out.

"Hey, hey. Stop that," Steve soothed and pulled the girl into a hug. "Let's use our problem-solving skills right now, okay?" El gumbled a protest against his shoulder, but Steve continued. "Hopper brought you into his home and takes care of you. He now calls this shack your home, too. He's proud of you. He's done everything he can for you. If he didn't want you to be his daughter, why would he do the things dads do for their daughters?"

El clutched Steve tightly, letting his words churn through her mind. It made sense. But at the same time, it didn't make any sense at all.

Steve eventually let the girl go and smoothed out her hair, before bringing her a toasted waffle to replace the ruined breakfast. "Dads give their daughters healthy breakfasts, but cool tutors let good students eat Eggos for breakfast."

El couldn't help but let out a giggle.

Steve was still at the house when Hopper returned home that evening. El had told him he really could go home, that she understood the lessons from today and is perfectly capable of doing her homework by herself. But El knew, and El knew that Steve knew, that she was too wound up to get anything done. And Steve didn't want to leave her alone.

As Steve and El worked on her history homework, Hopper flung off his hat and shed his coat, noting how El's silence at his arrival contrasted with her usual excitement to his return home. Steve coughed, and El glanced up at him and received a reassuring nod and a ruffle of her hair.

"See you tomorrow at the station, Chief!" Steve called as he threw on his bomber jacket.

Hopper jerked his head in acknowledgement. "See ya, kid," he returned.

Once the door clicked shut, the house was painfully silent.

Hopper was the first to talk, El's heart hammering in her chest and unwilling to speak out of fear of saying the wrong thing. "So, Ellie," he started, making El smile softly at the pet name, "Do you want to read or watch a show tonight?" he asked, making his way to the kitchen to microwave dinner.

El shrugged, although she wasn't entirely sure if he was looking at her or not. "Both are good," she replied, trying to appear occupied with her history.

Hopper came over to watch El hard at work. "You know, kid, if you're really busy tonight, maybe you should get your homework done first? And then we'll hang out."

El put her pencil down.

Dads care.

El shook herself from her thoughts. "Sounds good," she decided, smiling as earnestly as she could.

Hopper beamed back at her. "I'm proud of you, El. You're doing a great job."

Dads are proud.

Hopper went to turn back to the kitchen, but El grabbed his sleeve. "Hop?" she asked, voice sounding smaller than she wanted it to be.

Hopper stared back at the girl knowingly, but not entirely sure what to say. There was so much he wanted to say, but he settled with, “Do you want to talk about it?” for now.

El did.

So Hopper sat on the couch beside her and pulled her into a hug when he saw his precious girl’s bottom lip begin to tremble. “It’s okay, Ellie,” he soothed, rubbing circles on her back. And El wanted to believe that it was.

She just needed answers. She didn’t even know why she was crying. She knew Hopper wasn’t going to be the first to say something, always cautious to not push El’s emotional boundaries. Because he cared. Because he could be her father.

El hiccuped, and Hopper clutched her tighter. “You care,” she found her mouth stumbling out. “You gave me a home. You take care of me.” Hopper found tears brimming in the corner of his eyes too, and he tried to hush El’s hiccupped sobs that came between words. “You are proud of me. You like to spend time with me. You come home from work on time because I ask. You try to make me happy.” And El knew all those things were just the tip of the iceberg.

Hopper nodded against the top of El’s curly head. “Yeah, kid. I do all those things,” he affirmed.

El’s frame quivered. “You are like...”

Hopper didn’t make her finish. “A dad?” he asked, and El’s sobs grew in volume.

The two held each other for what could have been minutes, or could have been hours. They just held each other, marveling at the bond that bloomed between man and child without either of them realizing what it had become.

A family.

Hopper eventually let go of his daughter, and El sunk herself into the couch. “Let me get something,” he said, trying to sound stoic but failing horribly.

El twiddled her thumbs and watched her father disappear into his room, emerging only moments later with a piece of paper. Hop returned to his place beside El, concealing the words on the paper from her view.

“Now, if you don’t like this, we don’t have to use it, okay?” It was Hopper’s turn to choke out words. “But if you like it, I can- we can- you can be adopted. By me.”

He started to hand El the paper, but she shook her head to stop him. “First tell me what adoption is,” she asked cautiously. Hopper nodded.

“Adoption would make you my daughter, Ellie. It would make me your dad,” he explained, thick tears starting to roll down his cheeks as well. He gave El the paper again, and this time she took it, starting at the name that caught her attention at the top of the slip.

“Your last name could be Hopper.”

Printed neatly onto the paper was the name “Jane Hopper”. Born in Hawkins, Indiana. Born to Terry Ives. The woman who birthed her, who fought for her, who gave her the first name listed on the birth certificate, who meant nothing and something and so much to her all at the same time. El had so many feelings about the woman that she knew she wouldn’t be able to sort through them all in the time she held this paper.

But her last name was vastly less complicated.

Father and daughter shed their tears together as they hugged on the couch, not even sure why they were crying anymore but unable to stop. But once El’s hiccups ended and Hopper’s breathing leveled out, they were left with a newfound realization.

El Hopper’s dad was Jim Hopper.

Jim Hopper’s daughter was El Hopper.

El would be his daughter when he took off work the next morning to go out to breakfast with her. She would be his daughter when they read in silence next to each other. She would be his daughter every

day he left for the station, every night he told her "sweet dreams", and every morning he awoke to a very hangry teenager.

And he would be her father.

Adoption: It takes people who are not a family and makes them one. It gives a daughter a father. It gives a father a daughter. I am adopted.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, just one more chapter left.

I'll be getting emotional in the notes when it comes.

Thank you to everyone who's stuck with me through this fic.

I think you'll really like the finale.

I love you.

xox

18. Love

Summary for the Chapter:

I've lost track of how many people have requested this word. Needless to say, it's the most suggested. Here's to the finale!

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh holy goodness, I can't believe this is it. I don't want this to end, but I need it to so I can move onto new writing. This was an absolute joy to create, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading. If you want to keep up with my writing, my username is noth_lit_8 (not noth_lit_9, as it was previously), and I'm starting a new Stranger Things fic called Waves. It is vastly different from this one, but you can check out the prologue and see for yourself. It's already out! It will be compliant with this fic (if you wanna imagine it all in the same verse), but the characters are aged up to young adults. There will also be other stuff coming out, so if you wanna subscribe to me for email updates you can!

Enjoy this last chapter! This one's for you guys.

xox

December 1, 1985

"Dad, can you pick up more lined paper on your way home today?" El called into Hopper's bathroom, hoping he could hear her over the shower's roar.

A body wash bottle audibly fell from its shelf onto the marble tub's floor. "El, shower time is relaxing time!" she heard him reply, but El wasn't having any of that.

"I'm serious!" El retaliated, and after a moment's pause, she heard the water die off and heavy pattering of footsteps around the bathroom until her father emerged with wet hair and a uniform that was probably due to be washed.

"Jesus, El, obviously I'm gonna get you your lined paper," he grumbled, and El smiled. "Got a big report for Steve coming up?"

El shook her head. "No. Running out of papers for my word book," she corrected, and Hopper chuckled.

"I can't believe you went through all those so damn fast," he mumbled, and El felt her chest grow swollen with pride.

El could hardly believe it, herself. When she got her Word Book, there were so many pages that El thought she couldn't possibly learn enough words in all her life to fill it up. But here she was, less than a year later, asking for more to document her ever-growing knowledge.

When those pages were blank, El never spoke a single full sentence. When those pages were blank, she was struggling to teach herself about the world, without Steve to tutor and guide her. When those pages were blank, she had never felt sand between her toes. Never ridden a roller-coaster. Never counted the stars. Never painted her nails or went shopping or got stung by a bee. And as her collection of memories grew, so did her vocabulary. So did her love for the world.

Love.

That was one word she had not yet defined.

"Bye, El!" Hopper called on his way out, and El returned the goodbye.

She decided it was time to conquer this four-letter word. And she'd start with the most logical person she thought could teach her.

4.

"Hey, kiddo. Sleep well last night?" Steve asked when he entered the

living room, chuckling at El's bedhead. El nodded. "Let's take a look at those worksheets you did for today, sound good? Got any questions?"

El followed him and sat on her bed as Steve sat at the desk. "Yes," she started, and Steve looked up, awaiting her inquiry.

"What is love?"

The question had clearly taken her tutor aback, his eyebrows shooting up and eyes widening. He ran a hand through fluffed-up hair, and El moved from her bed to the table, sensing this might be a more complicated lesson than she had anticipated.

"Well, that's a good question," Steve responded slowly. El thought she saw some type of long-buried sadness in his eyes, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. There were times when Steve didn't know the answers to El's questions right away, but he was always able to flip to the back of a book or work it out with little effort.

But El was pretty sure there wasn't an answer key for this question.

"What do you think it is?" Steve decided to ask in reply, and El bit her lip, displeased with receiving a question in response to her question.

She had heard the word love used in many different contexts. Mike loved Dungeons and Dragons. Will loved drawing. Lucas loved his little sister. Max loved how fast she could move while skateboarding. Dustin loved Nilla Wafers. But those were all just things. Things that people liked. Like, really *really* like.

Like.

"You go to school dances with someone that you...like."

"A friend?"

"No, not a friend."

El let the memory situate itself soundly in her heart. She had felt so content in that cafeteria, right before all hell had broken loose.

She needed to answer Steve's question if she wanted to get closer to solving this mystery. "More than just like," El thought.

Steve nodded, smile playing on his lips but still situated somewhat somberly. "That's a good way of putting it. Anything else?"

El knew the types of people she was supposed to love, from readings and through the real world. Nancy Drew loved her dad. Sam and Diane in from Cheers, which she and Hopper sometimes watched at night, loved each other despite sometimes having funny ways of showing it. Will and Joyce always said, "I love you," to each other whenever they parted. And Dustin, ever the sap, had blurted out, "I love you guys," to the whole party more than a few times.

Those people they loved were special, too. Nancy trusted her dad more than anyone else. Sam and Diane kissed, and they only kissed each other-

She and Mike kissed, too.

She and Mike only kissed each other.

El sniffed and thought of how to word her answer. "You love what is special," she said slowly, drawing out each word to try to communicate her thoughts as concisely and accurately as possible.

"Yeah, kid. Yeah, you do," Steve murmured. El had a feeling Steve loved.

Steve slid his chair closer to her. "I don't know what I'm the best person to be explaining this," he admitted. "But love is a lot of things. I can't really tell you exactly what it is because you have to feel it for yourself," he tried explaining to a displeased El who wanted a concrete answer instead of a hypothetical. "You want to keep them safe. You trust them. You want to be with them. You care about them. They're different than everyone else," he explained. "And there are different kinds of love. I love my mom, for example, because she's special in a mom sort-of-way."

He gave El a long moment to reflect.

"And," Steve continued. "You can love people outside your family,

too. Like a special person. They're just different kinds of love. You do different things with the different kinds of people you love, and the different kinds of love. Do you know what I mean?"

El did.

"Someone you love is one of a kind," Steve continued. "Like I love my mom because I've only got one, and she's wonderful and special to me."

El understood. "Okay," she confirmed, nodding. "I love you, Steve."

If El thought his eyebrows shot up high after her question this morning, it was still nothing compared to his face now. "Wait, El," he stuttered and laughed, clearly worried El hadn't understood his explanation. "I know I'm a kick-ass babysitter, but I'm certainly not a one-of-a-kind Mom-"

"I only have one tutor," El explained. "I only have one person who teaches me about school and the world so I can go to high school with my friends. You are one of a kind."

Steve got a funny look in his eyes and he looked to really be paying attention to her. "Geez, well I love you too, kiddo."

3.

By the time Hopper came back to the house, El was practically jumping on the couch with excitement. It was Friday night and her friends didn't have school the next morning, which only meant one thing.

Hopper openly laughed at the sight he arrived to - El was dressed in the plaid dress she had purchased with Nancy, hair mingled with a few poorly-woven braids no other kid would wear out of the house, and a huge smile plastered on her face.

"I see you're ready to get going," Hopper chuckled at his daughter, and El jumped higher on the couch. "What's the getup for? I'm sure you're dressed more than alright for a night of board games."

El jumped from the couch and spun around until she reached her shoes. "I'm happy," she said.

Hopper thought his grin couldn't get any bigger. "Aw, kid, that's great! What are you happy about?"

El slipped on one boot. "Because I love," she said plainly, as though it was obvious.

Hopper's heart stopped, mind scrambling, wondering if she missed a word in her explanation. "You love...your dress?" he suggested, trying to figure out what his daughter meant.

"No. Um, yes. But no, I love. I just love," she said, spinning around to look him in the eye as though she understood something very simple that he didn't.

"Hold on..." Hopper trailed off, still confused and now somewhat worried. "What do you love, Ellie?" he prompted, and El reached for her coat, clearly anxious to get to the Wheeler residence, but Hopper's stern stare caught her attention.

El finally stopped her motions. "A lot," she answered with a huff, apparently tired of Hopper not understanding. "I love things and people. Like you! I love you, Hop...Dad!" she exclaimed, and Hopper finally got it.

He opened his arms, which El rushed into excitedly. Hopper wasn't sure if she understood the gravity of the words, but by God, of course he said them back.

He didn't mention that he never thought he'd hear someone say that to him again.

2.

Karen Wheeler answered the door.

"You must be Chief Hopper's niece!" she greeted to the girl who she had never seen, but had seen her plenty. El shook hands with the

woman and turned around to wave goodbye to her father in the pickup as Karen shut the door.

“The boys are downstairs,” she directed, and El was gone before she finished her statement. Karen thought to herself that the girl’s demeanor mimicked her uncle’s.

El clambered down the steps to be greeted by the faces of Lucas, Dustin, Will, and Max, who were all intensely focused on Dustin dealing out Monopoly money.

“Look who made it!” Will greeted as he got up to give El a hug.

“Hey, El!” Dustin called. “Can you get your boyfriend to get his ass downstairs? He’s gonna be late if he doesn’t finish his homework really soon, and I’m gonna take the racecar whether he likes it or not.”

Although she wished Mike was downstairs right now, El still giggled at the title “boyfriend” - a word that had gradually woven itself as a crucial term in their lives in silence, as though they had their backs turned and when they spun around, it had become commonplace. “No,” El responded simply, and Max laughed.

“Oh, I love you guys!” El remembered to say, and picked up the wheelbarrow as abrupt silence fell over the group.

To the surprise of everyone in the room, including El, although she wasn’t sure why, the small, “Love you too,” that was mumbled back to her came from Lucas. Fiercely protective, badass Lucas who didn’t even like to hold hands with his girlfriend in front of others.

Will couldn’t help but laugh, and he leaned over Dustin to give El another hug. “We love you too, El!” he replied easily. Strong, resilient, kind-hearted Will who had hidden his paralysing fears as best as he could, in order to protect those around him.

Max huffed out something between a choke and a chuckle. “Well, if we’re having one of those moments, love you too, El. Love all you guys,” Max, their strong-willed, witty, intelligent friend added with a blush.

“Well, it looks like we all love each other!” Dustin, ever the nurturing, sensitive, brave soul, exclaimed, and El was wrapped up in a hug before she knew it.

“Wheeler’s missing out on all the love,” Max laughed in the embrace.

1.

By the time Mike finished all the work Karen insisted he complete before joining his friends, Dustin had taken the racecar.

“You ass!” Mike called as he took his seat besides El and counted the Monopoly money, not putting it passed his friends to scam him.

Laughter and taunts and the occasional swear filled the air as the night grew older and the teens’ eyelids grew heavier.

Will fell asleep first, taking up the entire couch despite his smaller frame, but no one was about to disturb him.

Lucas was the next man down - he knocked out on the carpet below the couch, and Max excused herself to join him, citing a need to “keep his skinny arms warm”.

Dustin powered through the night considerably well - only fading when El was in such a lead he knew he could never catch up.

Mike and El watched their friends sleep for a moment, content to take in the safety and calamity of the scene. Until Mike started shifting more weight onto El than she was used to him doing, and she knew he was about done for.

“C’m on, Mike,” she whispered, and the couple crossed the room to crawl under the structure Mike had never taken down. Into the place El and Mike both knew, deep in the recesses of their minds, that they would always come back to.

El lied on her side and Mike slid in next to her, pressing a kiss to her sleepy lips.

“El, I need to tell you something,” Mike murmured, forcing El to make herself stay awake just a bit longer, despite the unconsciousness so close to pulling her away. She nodded and opened her eyes, letting Mike do the talking, enjoying the tickle of his breath on her cupid’s bow.

She could see his eyes through the night, shining despite the lack of light.

All she could think of was how she would follow this boy to the edge of the world.

And when he told her what he had to say, they held each other surrounded by the darkness of the fort in the Wheeler’s basement.

And as El pressed her curls against sleeping Mike’s forehead, El knew she not only loved, but was loved.

Love: You can't write it. You have to feel it.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am one soft bitch for you guys.
I give you my love.
xox

Author's Note:

Comments make me smile.
xox